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This project explores issues of performing the “exotic Other” in neo-burlesque dance. Using the examples of performers Dita Von Teese’s “Opium Den,” Jett Adore’s “Zorro,” and Calamity Chang’s “Hello Kitty” acts, questions regarding racial stereotypes, cultural appropriation, subversion, and agency in neo-burlesque are explored, probing the complexity of multi-layered performances of gender, culture, and race.

STRIPPING (AWAY) THE STEREOTYPE: RACE, CULTURE, AND GENDER IN
NEO-BURLESQUE PERFORMANCE

by

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To Thomas Stover, whose love and support I am grateful for every day.

APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“*Clink*” went the three shot glasses as we huddled in the backseat of the car on a sweltering July afternoon. We touched the glass rims together, took a breath, and gulped down the amber colored José Cuervo, coughing slightly as the burning sensation moved down our throats. We were ready.

We stepped out of the car into the hot summer day. Summers in New Orleans are like no other place. The temperatures climb into the 90’s, which wouldn’t be horribly unbearable if it were not for the humidity. Oh, the humidity. The air clings to your skin like a wet, sticky blanket. Forget taking a shower in the morning. The moment you step outside, you will be taking a shower in your own sweat. Our skin prickled in the heavy heat as we walked through the parking lot to the unassuming doorway of Crescent Lotus Dance Studio, situated between a burger joint and a Mediterranean restaurant. The door to the studio was less than ideally located next to the building dumpster, causing the scent of burger grease to linger in your nostrils and hair. This was the home of the New Orleans School of Burlesque.

I was a freshly minted graduate of Tulane University, less than three months out of college. I had spent my summer doing what most college graduates in the year 2010 did: sending out multiple applications every day for a job, any job, that might pay my bills. My Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in dance and history was not proving to be

particularly appealing to the hiring powers of the universe. Making matters worse, I was dealing with the common existential crisis of people my age: I found myself with a degree in hand and no clue with to do with it, if anything at all. Specifically, I had just spent four years intensely studying ballet and modern dance, only to find that I was not sure if I wanted to continue dancing anymore. I did not enjoy taking class or performing nearly as much as I had when I was younger, and felt that loss keenly. I wanted to recapture it, but had come to believe that was no longer possible and quitting sounded like the more appealing option.

I managed to find a job working at a local dog daycare/boarding facility. It was less than ideal work, considering I spent most of my days cleaning up dog feces, urine, and vomit, but it was a job and for that I was grateful. After working there a few weeks, I started thinking about dancing again. I was practicing yoga on a sporadic basis, but it was not fulfilling the movement desires I craved. But the idea of returning to a traditional dance class still troubled me. In the meantime, a friend of mine from college who had also studied dance was experiencing a similar desire to dance again, but was also hesitant to return to the ballet barre. We took to Google to see what other options might be available. We figured, “We live in New Orleans. There has got to be some sort of fun, interesting, non-ballet/modern possibilities out there!” This led us to Crescent Lotus Dance studio, which offered West African, yoga, qi gong, bounce fitness, salsa, pole dancing, belly dance, dance meditation, Zumba...and burlesque.

We jumped on the idea of burlesque. Neither one of us had ever been to a burlesque show (and this was before the “Burlesque” movie starring Cher and Christina Aguilera came out) or really knew anything about burlesque. I suppose we liked the idea of doing something “sexy,” but not as in-your-face or intimidating as pole dancing. We picked a date to attend our first class and convinced her roommate to come with us. There’s safety in numbers, right?

This brought us to that parking lot one hot, sticky July evening, doing a quick shot of tequila in the backseat of the car to calm our nervous giggles. Perhaps we hoped a little liquid courage would also embolden us to take on the terrifying concept of “being sexy.” I know I needed that courage. The idea of “being sexy,” particularly in a dance or performance setting, was beyond foreign. For me, that concept required one to be confident in one’s self and body, or at least be able to fake it. I could do neither. For many complex reasons, during my later years in college I had developed what one of my therapists called “a mash-up of disordered eating habits.” My relationship with my college sweetheart had recently crashed and burned in a rather spectacular fashion, I remained closeted about my identity as a bisexual woman, and I was struggling to pay my bills by working a job where I literally came home smelling like shit. It was not a good time for my general feelings of self-worth, self-confidence, or whatever term you might like to use.

Walking through the studio door, we were warmly greeted by Bella Blue, the founder and “Headmistress” of the New Orleans School of Burlesque. Bella Blue is a

fixture in the New Orleans burlesque community, having performed with troupes such as Fleur de Tease and Slow Burn Burlesque since 2007. She is also the Artistic Director of the “Dirty Dime Peep Show” and the “New Orleans School of Burlesque Student Showcase,” as well as the producer of “The Blue Book Cabaret.”¹ She founded the New Orleans School of Burlesque in 2008 and it had been running weekly classes at the Crescent Lotus studio for two years the day I nervously tip-toed through the door.

We stashed our purses and shoes in a corner of the waiting room, and then made our way into the studio space. The familiarity of entering a dance space, with its wall of mirrors and polished wood floor, was calming. I patted my perspiring palms on my black yoga pants and sea-foam green tank top. We each found a spot on the dance floor, not too close as to infringe on one another’s space, but not so far away that our shared sense of support might be compromised, and started stretching, since that seems to be the immediate physical response of any dancer when they enter a dance studio. A few minutes passed as other students filtered in. Some were newcomers, like us, and some had clearly been there before. At 6:20, Bella came in, hooked up her phone to the sound system, and music blared from the speakers.

Class started with a warm-up recognizable to just about any dance student: head, shoulder, and hip isolations, followed by several hip and hamstring stretches. The familiarity of the routine calmed the butterflies in my stomach momentarily as I moved my body in ways I have spent countless hours practicing and learning. Perhaps this

¹ “New Orleans School of Burlesque,” www.nolaschoolofburlesque.com. (Accessed March 20, 2015).

wouldn't be so scary after all! Warm-up lasted about five minutes, then Bella instructed us to move to the far side of the room for an "across the floor" combination. Oh good, more familiar terminology! Etta James' "At Last" began playing over the speakers as she instructed us to slowly walk across the floor, in time with Etta's slow, sultry voice. It was a simple combination: 4 counts of walking straight across the floor, looking towards the audience, then 4 counts of walking around ourselves in a circle, hands on hips. Simple, right? So why were my palms suddenly sweating and my heart felt like it might jump out of my throat?!

My dance training must have kicked in because I managed to make it across the floor without tripping over my own feet. We repeated the combination a few more times, all of us growing bolder with each repetition. We learned another simple movement combination, this one including a couple of hip rolls and shoulder shimmies. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that I have a knack for the shimmy. This discovery further boosted my confidence that maybe, just maybe, I could make it through this class without embarrassing myself. But then Bella threw us a curveball: End this combination with a pose of your choice. Uh, what? My brain exploded into over-analytic overdrive: "Wait, what?! What kind of pose? Where do I face? What do I do? Oh god, am I supposed to look sexy? I don't know how to pose in a sexy way!! Oh god, what is happening?! What do I do?!"

My brain only exploded more after what she said next. She instructed us that if we were having trouble finding a way to pose, choose a part of our body that we absolutely

love and show it off. Again, what?! The internal monologue ignited: “Wait, a part of my body that I like?! I have no idea! I don’t like my body! There are a million things wrong with it! Isn’t it vain to think that a part of my body is worth showing off? I don’t know what to do!” It really threw me for a loop to hear a dance instructor asking students to identify a part of their body that they loved. I don’t wish to portray all of my previous dance teachers as negative; on the contrary, I have been lucky to study with several wonderful teachers over the years who would never consciously tell someone that there was something wrong with their body. But it is an unfortunate reality that much of the dance world is permeated by negative body imaging and insanely unrealistic standards, particularly for women. Add to that my struggles with body image and disordered eating practices, and you may begin to understand why it was so shocking to my system to hear that my body was worth celebrating.

My head continued to buzz after class ended. Bella thanked us for coming and encouraged us to come again. My friends and I cheered in the car, congratulating each other for trying something new, not tripping over our feet, and having fun at the same time. A week went by, and I couldn’t get the experience out of my head. So I went back the following Tuesday. My friends had to work, so I went solo and had just as good a time as the first week. I was hooked. Tuesday night burlesque classes became a regular part of my week. Though my work schedule was highly subject to change, by that point my boss had settled on having me work the opening shift from 6 a.m. through 3 p.m. The days I worked varied so I never had a set “weekend.” Consequently, Tuesday night became the only constant in my week. It became what I could count on and look forward

to. I may not have had a weekend, or even two days off in a row, but damnit, I had one hour every Tuesday evening where I could go and feel good about myself and be around other women wanting to do the same. It was when I could forget how much I hated my job or how lost I often felt, particularly when relatives called to ask what I was planning to do now that I had finished college. So when Bella asked the class one week if any of us were interested in performing in the New Orleans School of Burlesque Student Showcase, my hand went straight into the air. The fact that I had still never actually seen a burlesque show didn't seem to make a difference in my thought process.

Of course, as soon as it sank in that I had volunteered to get up onstage and perform in a burlesque show, my brain went into familiar panic mode: "Wait, did I just volunteer to take off my clothes onstage? With people watching?! Oh god, there are going to be people watching me! There are going to be people staring at my un-clothed body! What on earth am I going to do up there?! What the hell was I thinking?!" And of course, the most terrifying thought of all: "WHAT IF MY PARENTS FIND OUT?!" (I had conveniently forgotten to mention my new hobby to them during our phone conversations.) I considered backing out, but something stopped me from throwing in the glittery towel. Curiosity perhaps, or a desire for a new experience. Whatever the reason, I started choreographing and rehearsing what would be my first solo burlesque act. I chose Duke Ellington's "Sugar Rum Cherry" for my music, as a nod to my ballet background, since "Sugar Rum Cherry" is Ellington's version of Tchaikovsky's "Sugar Plum Fairy" variation. My costume was perhaps not particularly creative: a red corset, fitted gray skirt, strappy black shoes, black thigh highs, and red and black lacy lingerie. But just the

act of compiling this costume and choreographing my solo was all I could even begin to fathom at this point.

The night of the show arrived and, unsurprisingly, I was a nervous wreck. Fortunately, I had several friends in the audience who were ready to cheer me on, no matter what happened. The butterflies in my stomach slowed somewhat as I settled backstage in the dimly lit dressing room to apply my make-up and fix my hair. The dressing room tables overflowed with costume pieces, discarded fake eyelashes, vials of pasty glue, a plethora of make-up kits, sewing utensils, bobby pins, and countless containers of glitter. A faint scent of cigarette smoke and hairspray lingered in the air.

Getting into costume felt a little odd, given that the first thing I had to put on was a pair of sparkly pasties. Standing topless in the middle of a crowded dressing room with my hands pressed over my breasts to ensure the adhesive on the back of the pasties would stick to my skin (No one wants a pastie to go flying off in the middle of their act!) was certainly a new experience. The ease in which the plethora of semi-nude women and men stood around the dressing room, conversing and laughing as we all took part in the rituals of make-up application, struck me. And the glitter. Oh, the glitter! Everyone's skin shimmered with layers of glitter. It stuck to clothes, shoes, the floor, the make-up table, and just about every other surface in the nearby vicinity. I would find it in the oddest places for the next several days: my clothes, hair, shower, my bed, and even on my dog!

I was fourth in the line-up for the show. Our emcee for the evening was Ben Wisdom, who emcees for shows all over New Orleans like Slow Burn Burlesque, the

Blue Book Cabaret, and the Dirty Dime Peep Show. His brand of humor can only be (affectionately) described as dirty, raunchy, and wildly inappropriate in the most wonderful kind of way. He is now by far my favorite burlesque emcee. Even though I had lived in New Orleans for four years at this point, I was not even close to prepared for the wild, bawdy humor of that evening. If I recall correctly, I believe he started the show by making fun of the telecommunications company, Cox Communications, who had been running television advertisements for their services with taglines including “Cox for your whole family” or perhaps the most cringe-worthy, “Cox for Kids.” Perhaps the worst of all was that they were broadcasting the Honeybees, the dance team for the then-New Orleans Hornets basketball team (they are now the Pelicans), workouts so you could watch and get their workout routines and tips at home. This ad most unfortunately promoted itself by proclaiming “Watch the Honeybees rock out on Cox!” Needless to say, it was not difficult for a comedian like Ben Wisdom to get a lot of raunchy jokes out of this material. Really, it was almost too easy. I was glad the lights were dim backstage so no one could see me blush.

Once the show started, it went by in a blur of sparkly pasties, glittery bodies, pounding music, and clothes flying every which way. Before I knew it, I heard Ben Wisdom introducing my stage name, Fleur LaRouge (After I left New Orleans, I changed it to Fleur Delice.) Heart racing, I took my place center-stage, behind the closed curtains, and waited for my music to begin and the curtain to open. Only, the curtain didn’t open. I heard the beginning notes of my music playing, but the curtain was still closed! I looked from side to side, but there was no one in the wings to pull the cord to open the curtain. I

later learned that there had been a mix-up as to who was supposed to open the curtain for whom and a miscommunication ensued that caused the confusion.

I froze, not knowing what to do. Should I go open the damn thing myself? Wait and see what happened? Meanwhile I could hear my music playing and the confused mumblings of the audience. What should I do?! My mouth had gone dry and my hands shook. Thankfully, the DJ must have known something wasn't quite right because he stopped the music, and one of the dancers watching from backstage caught on to the snafu and rushed into the wings to pull the curtain open. The music re-started and I was suddenly acutely aware of the hundred or so eyes on me.

I had purposely choreographed the beginning of my act to face away from the audience, anticipating the extreme nerves that would kick in. For the first few measures, I teased the audience with glances over my shoulder, growing bolder with each passing note. My friends' cheers and whistles, combined with that of total strangers, emboldened me further until I was moving confidently across the stage. Without straying too far from my choreography, I began to add moments of embellishment and improvisation.

Realizing the stage was slicker than I had anticipated, I quickly kicked off my black strappy heels, immediately feeling more comfortable and confident now that I didn't have to worry about wiping out. As I began to unhook my corset, I paused and looked at the audience, daring them to cheer louder. They happily complied and I unfastened another few hooks. I sustained moments they responded to with cheers, and threw in spontaneous

smiles, winks, or sultry come-hither glances, flirting and making eye contact with the closest seats.

I barely noticed my increasing state of nudity, as I stripped off my skirt and corset with abandon. This wasn't scary; this was awesome! Unlike other dance performances, I did not find myself obsessively counting the music or thinking about how to exactly execute each movement. I just moved! And moved in ways that I had never moved before. I felt a strong connection to the audience, instead of thinking of them as a mass, shapeless entity with (judgmental) eyes. Instead of the detachment from my body that I so often felt in other dance settings, I had this incredibly deep sense of how my body was moving and how amazing it felt. This was wonderful! I felt alive! But as I peeled off my black, lacy thigh-high stockings, I realized the moment of truth was about to arrive: To take off the bra or not to take off the bra?

I had gone back and forth on this choice almost every day leading up to the show. The idea of dancing onstage in my underwear was intimidating enough, but I could wrap my head around it because I had performed in dance shows wearing fairly revealing outfits before. But the idea of being topless in front of an audience was a whole other monster, even with the knowledge that pasties would cover some percentage of my breasts, however small. I worried that people might think my breasts looked uneven or unattractive. In retrospect, the idea of worrying about how breasts look seems so ridiculous and is no longer something I concern myself with, but at the time it was a very real fear. But there was also a very strong part of me that thought, "If I'm going to do a

burlesque performance, I might as well go all the way and really *do* it. If I am going to do this to conquer several of my fears, why not conquer as many as possible?" I decided to not choose until the show, allowing whatever feelings and emotions that came out during my performance to guide me. I made and wore a pair of red and black bejeweled pasties just in case I did decide to reveal all.

The moment of decision had finally arrived, as I stood onstage, music blaring, in black lacy panties and a lacy red and black bra. Without hesitation, I turned my back to the audience, playfully glancing over my shoulder with a teasing smile as my hand reached for the clasp of my bra. Loud cheers. I unclasped the hooks. More excited cheers. I let one strap slowly fall off my shoulder, then the other, as the noise from the audience increased and the music reached a crescendo. In one smooth motion, I removed it completely, twirling it by one strap while pivoting to face the raucous audience.

The music ended and I strutted offstage, beaming and heart pounding. I could hear my friends screaming their heads off in the audience and I started giggling hysterically as all the pent-up anxiety and adrenaline caught up to me. The past three minutes and 30 seconds suddenly seemed a blur. Another performer came up to me, asking how it went and I could only say, "Holy shit, that was fucking amazing!" Perhaps not my best use of language, but it was the only phrase that seemed to encapsulate what had just transpired. And after the show, one of my friends summed up my performance by loudly (and rather drunkenly) proclaiming, "Oh my god, you just took that stage and

made it your bitch!” Again, perhaps not the most coherent use of language, but it worked well enough.

In the days following the show, the only thing I could think about was how much I wanted to get back up onstage to do it all over again. I had been bitten by the burlesque bug in a big way. I attempted to explain to a friend how mind-altering the experience had been. In all my years of performing, I had never felt so connected to the audience. I had never felt so invigorated and alive on stage. I had never been so acutely aware of every movement and every sensory experience. I felt as though I had found a part of myself onstage that I didn’t even know I was looking for and now that I had momentarily glimpsed this part of me, I wanted more. I wanted this part of me to come out to play not just when I was onstage, but in my “normal” day-to-day life.

What happened next? Not much, to be honest. I worked as many hours as I could at my job, barely making enough to scrape by. I wanted to do more, perform more, but sadly, you can’t pay bills with envelopes of glitter. I continued to take classes at the New Orleans School of Burlesque, still loving it, and started attending as many burlesque shows as I could afford. In my spare time, I watched YouTube videos of performers from all over the country, wanting to learn more and see more. My eyes really began to open to the myriad of performance possibilities burlesque had to offer. I learned that there was a big difference between the more classic, “old school” burlesque styles and the newer “neo-burlesque” performers that were emerging and pushing the envelope, asking what more burlesque could be. I went to shows by New Orleans troupes, Fleur de Tease and

Slow Burn Burlesque. I saw Dita von Teese, one of the most well-known burlesque dancers in the world, perform at the House of Blues, in costumes coated with Swarovski crystals. I saw Bella Blue's "Dirty Dime Peep Show," which has made a name for itself by being the most boundary-pushing burlesque show in New Orleans. My jaw dropped the night I saw one performer dress up as a fetus, complete with a coat hanger stuck in her head, and strip to Destiny's Child 2001 classic, "Survivor."

Meanwhile, as all of this was happening and after a few months of burlesque and sporadic yoga classes being my only form of exercise, I found myself reaching for my ballet shoes again. Though I had felt fairly disillusioned with classical dance when I graduated college, I just was not ready to call it quits altogether. Not yet. I gave ballet classes one more chance. Only a few weeks passed before I found myself at an audition for Ballet Hysell's, a local ballet company, production of "The Nutcracker." I was pleasantly surprised when I was cast in the Spanish variation, as well as a corps de ballet member of the Snow Scene in Act 1 and the Waltz of the Flowers in Act 2. Before long, I was spending several hours a week in rehearsals, as well as attending ballet classes three or four days a week. I also managed to keep attending burlesque classes during this time as well, which provided a much-needed balance to the sudden ballet re-immersion I was experiencing.

After "The Nutcracker" performances ended in December, a ballet teacher whose class I had been regularly attending, approached me about performing with his contemporary company, D'Project. I happily agreed. Before long, I had jumped into the

deep end of the New Orleans dance community and was thrilled to realize how much I had fallen back in love with taking classes, rehearsing, and performing. For the first time I could remember, I was comfortable in my own body, which made taking chances in rehearsals and my own choreography projects much easier and more exciting. And throughout this process, I still made efforts to continue my education in burlesque.

After a couple of years and for a myriad of reasons, my next move was to apply to graduate school dance programs, mostly ones with a heavy writing and research emphasis. This brought me to the MA in Dance Theories & Practice program at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro. I wanted to start studying burlesque, specifically neo-burlesque, from a more academic standpoint. Through my coursework I was introduced to several critical lenses through which to view and analyze burlesque, including cultural studies, gender and queer theory, and race. Additionally, I started teaching “Introduction to Burlesque” workshops in the dance department, which encompassed a brief historical overview of the form, improvisation exercises, creating a character, and movement combinations. I also met a student in the Women & Gender Studies department who had some experience with burlesque. Our shared interest in neo-burlesque, queer theory, and performance led to the creation of a “Queerlesque” show, which is probably one of the highlights of my graduate school career. Almost all of the performers were dance students who had taken my workshop and this was their first time performing in a burlesque show. They created their own acts and did an absolutely amazing job!

During the course of my graduate studies, one thing has begun to trouble me: Burlesque is mostly populated by white performers. Burlesque histories tend to highlight white performers like Gypsy Rose Lee, Sally Rand, and Blaze Starr. For the most part, Josephine Baker is the only performer of color mentioned in most burlesque history texts. Neo-burlesque, from my experiences and observations, is mostly performed by white women, though there are many performers of color making their mark in the burlesque scene currently. My subsequent research in the areas of race and burlesque then presented another issue: cultural appropriation and performance of racial stereotypes, often by white performers. Perhaps the most egregious example is a performance I attended before graduate school was even a thought in the back of my mind: Dita Von Teese's performance at the New Orleans House of Blues in July 2011, when she performed an act entitled "Opium Den," which I will discuss in further detail later. While most burlesque acts that I have seen, thankfully, do not display a blatant level of racial stereotyping, cultural appropriation does appear in less in-your-face methods. However, I think there are also performers who actively subvert and resist this tendency, which heartens me and also makes for what I find to be fascinating, creative, boundary-pushing burlesque art.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

This project grew from my desire to investigate racial issues, cultural appropriation, and gender in the realm of neo-burlesque. As Sherrill Dodd's notes, "Although neo-burlesque appears to endorse social and corporeal inclusion, other areas of diversity are less apparent. While I have witnessed performances by African-American, American Korean and Latin American artists and two black British performers, burlesque tends to be dominated by white British and American artists." Additionally, of the women she interviewed for her chapter, "Naughty But Nice: Re-Articulations of Value in Neo-Burlesque Striptease," all of them "were educated to degree level (or had completed a three-year performance training that included related academic studies), which suggests a relatively high level of social and cultural capital."² This argument fits with a great deal of my experience in burlesque and I would argue is a major shift from the era of "classic burlesque" circa the 1920's-1960's, where women predominantly performed in burlesque as a source of income. While this does not negate the artistic value of their work, the shift from burlesque as an occupation to burlesque as an artistic pursuit represents a shift in the make-up of the burlesque community. Out of the six performers Dodds interviewed, "only two could rely on neo-burlesque as a full-time occupation, one had a part-time job

² Sherrill Dodds, *Dancing on the Canon: Embodiments of Value in Popular Dance* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 116.

to build upon her neo-burlesque income, and three had full-time jobs which allowed them to support their neo-burlesque performance interests.”³

The impact this shift in class diversity has on neo-burlesque is potentially both problematic and positive. On one hand, it could be argued that because neo-burlesque performers are, in large part, not relying on performance for their main source of income, they may be more able to make artistic choices that might otherwise not have been available. By this, I mean that the consideration of catering to audience preferences might be somewhat lessened when the pressing issue of financial survival is not at stake for the performer. Yes, as performers we all want for an audience to show up and of course it is wonderful when you have a packed house of audience members who love the show and what you are presenting onstage. I am not saying that performers do not care about entertaining the audience. What I do think is that when a performer’s livelihood is at stake and based on ticket sales and tips, there is a tendency to give audience desires and expectations greater weight in developing an act.

This does not mean that bad, boring, or stereotypical acts are then a foregone conclusion. Quite the contrary; Gypsy Rose Lee, one of the most successful burlesque performers of her time, was famous for her witty “literary stripper” persona and could drag out a striptease for over 20 minutes if she was allowed to, in contrast to most other performers who did not speak onstage and had acts lasting the length of one song. However, when the economic pressure is lessened, one could argue that when neo-

³ Sherrill Dodds, *Dancing on the Canon: Embodiments of Value in Popular Dance* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 116.

burlesque performers have necessary income, it “enables them to produce performances that challenge, negotiate, and re-imagine the striptease body.”⁴ In other words, the focus of the performer can theoretically be on the creation of challenging, creative, boundary-pushing art, rather than creating acts that cater to mainstream taste and standards in order to ensure financial success.

Of course, in a perfect world burlesque performers could find both financial success and create art that challenges the status quo. There are neo-burlesque performers who are finding a way to strike that balance, but they are by and large the exception, not the norm. This is true for the dance world in general. However, it is not my point to argue about financial stability and funding for the arts. (At least, not in this particular paper.) What I do want to draw attention to is that neo-burlesque is largely populated by white, educated women who occupy a particular economic status that is unlike that of their predecessors. This status allows them, perhaps, greater autonomy in creating acts that question society’s standards and views of their bodies, amongst many other things; acts that perhaps could not have been created if financial success of the act was the first and greatest priority.

Additionally, many neo-burlesque artists find burlesque performance to be a method of finding and performing empowerment for themselves; a way to express themselves and embrace their sexuality. Dodds argues that due to the ethos of “corporeal inclusivity” espoused by neo-burlesque with its “celebration of body sizes that operate

⁴ Sherrill Dodds, *Dancing on the Canon: Embodiments of Value in Popular Dance*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 134.

outside the dominant cultural aesthetic,” as well as its embrace of bodies that “resist the commercial imagery of advertising...pierced and tattooed bodies (The World Famous Pontani Sisters and Fancy Chance), queer bodies (Bearlesque), disabled bodies (Matt Fraser), transgender bodies (Lazlo Pearlman), and ‘older’ bodies (Jo ‘Boobs’ Weldon and Jo King),”⁵ neo-burlesque offers a way for artists to celebrate their own sexuality and power onstage. As performer Margaret Cho stated,

As someone who has grown up with an intense amount of body shame, having suffered from eating disorders of every kind for most of my teenage and adult life, burlesque has been the ultimate cure. Watching a beautiful woman enjoying her body, sharing it with an audience basking in her humor and sensuality and loving her as she loves herself, teasing and taunting them in a sexy hide-and-seek using fans or other fanciful props—this is the antidote to our poisonous and depressing body issues. One of my very favorite dancers, the illustrious and incandescent Tigger!, said, “The best thing I ever did for my body was to start *showing it!*”⁶

This sentiment of loving one’s body has been echoed in almost every burlesque class and workshop I have ever taken under different teachers, including Bella Blue, Moxie Sazerac, Trixie Minx, Kitten LaRue, and LouHenry Hoover. However, I do not wish to portray burlesque as a cure-all for body issues, nor am I comfortable with some of the rhetoric painting it as such. To quote Dodds again, the “neo-burlesque community makes a powerful claim to values of autonomy, inclusion, and empowerment. Although evidence of this exists within the context of the neo-burlesque striptease, these utopian ideals are delimited by economic structures and dominant social codes of race and

⁵ Sherrill Dodds, *Dancing on the Canon: Embodiments of Value in Popular Dance*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 116.

⁶ Jo Weldon, *The Burlesque Handbook*. (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), ix.

class.”⁷ I believe that neo-burlesque presents a great deal of possibilities for performers to embrace their body and sexuality, but it is by no means a utopian panacea for society’s ills. There still needs to be a constant level of critique when discussing politics of inclusion and empowerment. Who are we “empowering?” What does that word mean to different people? What does it look like? Who is included and who is not? Which leads me to my next point: the problem of finding “empowerment” in performing an “other” persona.

We have established that neo-burlesque is currently dominated largely by white female performers. Furthermore, many of these performers see burlesque performance as a way to find and perform a sense of sensuality and sexuality that they do not feel society allows them to experience in their day-to-day existence. However, a potentially harmful pattern I have noticed amongst neo-burlesque performers is a tendency to dress up as an exotic Other in order to access that feeling of sensuality. There is a long history of this in burlesque which I will not go into detail here, as that is a project that one could write an entire book on. Suffice it to say, one such example of this tradition can be seen in the practice of the burlesque persona names that performers choose for themselves: Dita Von Teese, Roxie LaRouge, Duchess von Hart, Jett Adore, and my own name, Fleur Delice. While there are no “rules” regarding how a burlesque performer can or cannot name themselves (although wordplay is a time-honored and often funny tradition), there is a tendency to choose names that sound like they are from a different language, particularly French or German.

⁷ Sherrill Dodds, *Dancing on the Canon: Embodiments of Value in Popular Dance*. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 134.

This desire to play at being the exotic Other manifests itself in subtle ways, as well as more blatant performances. Anthony Shay's book, *Dancing Across Borders: The American Fascination with Exotic Dance Forms*, examines the phenomenon of "millions of mainstream Americans who sought through dance to assume exotic new identities. Sometimes they sought these new, exotic identities momentarily, through stage performances or social dance activities, and sometimes on a long-term basis, through professional immersion in scholarly or performance careers."⁸ From taking classes in Balkan dancing, tango, or Asian classical dances, Shay argues that this fascination with taking on the exotic Other persona is a "uniquely American phenomenon ..." which frequently "led to the appropriation of the fruits of other people's cultural expression such as their dances and music in order to construct new, more exciting and exotic identities."⁹ While I do not necessarily agree with Shay's assertion that this is quite as "uniquely American" as he believes, I would argue that the privileged position (white) Americans occupy allows them the ability to seek out more exotic identities, for a short or more extended period of time, depending on their desires. Furthermore, discourses of knowledge regarding sexuality in the United States are constructed in very specific ways that I would argue can potentially lead to performers desiring to become or dress up as the exotic Other in order to escape prevailing societal constructs regarding sexuality, particularly female sexuality.

⁸ Anthony Shay, *Dancing Across Borders: The American Fascination with Exotic Dance Forms*. (Jefferson, NC & London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2008), 5.

⁹ Ibid., 7.

To expand upon this idea, I wish to draw upon the first volume of Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, which seeks to provide a theoretical basis for his larger 3 volume project, in which he discusses the knowledge-production and power mechanisms of sexuality discourses in the West. Beginning with the ramifications of Victorian-era societal constructs, Foucault argues that to "say that sex is not repressed, or rather that the relationship between sex and power is not characterized by repression, is to risk falling into a sterile paradox... The question I would like to pose is not, Why are we repressed? But rather, Why do we say, with so much passion and so much resentment against our most recent past, against our present, and against ourselves, that we are repressed?"¹⁰ He further asks "why we burden ourselves today with so much guilt for having once made sex a sin."¹¹ Rather than argue that we, particularly Western societies, are repressed and that sexual discourse did not occur due to Victorian era taboos that have continued to affect our current discourses, Foucault's intervention argues that there is an abundance of discourse regarding sexuality and it is written in very specific ways.

Foucault identified a particular concept that he argued differentiated Western discourse on sexuality: the idea that the West is "undoubtedly, the only civilization to practice a *scientia sexualis*; or rather, the only civilization to have developed over the centuries procedures for telling the truth of sex what are geared to a form of knowledge-power strictly opposed to the art of initiations and the masterful secret."¹² By defining

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, An Introduction: Volume I* (New York: Random House, Inc. 1978), 8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 58.

sexuality as being “by nature: a domain susceptible to pathological processes,”¹³ Foucault argues that the West is the only major civilization to have produced a discourse on sexuality that is geared towards Enlightenment principles of application of the scientific method, carefully “controlled” studies, quantification, and discovery of universal “truths.” Additionally, the scientific approach to sex was and perhaps still is thought to provide a way to study a person. Tellingly, “the most discrete event in one’s sexual behavior-whether an accident or a deviation, a deficit or excess-was deemed capable of entailing the most varied consequences throughout one’s existence; there was scarcely a malady or physical disturbance to which the nineteenth century did not impute at least some degree of sexual etiology.”¹⁴

The contrast to this, Foucault argues, is the concept of “*ars erotica*...erotic art, truth is drawn from pleasure itself, understood as a practice, and accumulated as experience.” Pleasure is evaluated in terms of “its reverberations in the body and soul.”¹⁵ Essentially, (non-Western) societies that practice an *ars erotica* have an understanding of sex and sexuality that cannot be quantified in the ways that the West attempts to do through scientific analysis. Pleasure is evaluated in terms of “its reverberations in the body and the soul.”¹⁶ Foucault argued that the value *ars erotica* places on these bodily

¹³Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, An Introduction: Volume I* (New York: Random House, Inc. 1978), 68.

¹⁴ Ibid., 65.

¹⁵ Ibid., 57.

¹⁶ Ibid., 57.

and soul reverberations is absent in Western discourses, which are those of “bodies and life processes-the discourse of science.”¹⁷

While I agree with much of Foucault’s critiques of our discourses surrounding sex and sexuality, I take issue with his method of contrasting the West with what he perceives to be an Eastern way of knowing. He is also quite vague in his division of Western vs. non-Western, lumping China, Japan, India, Rome, and the “Arabo-Muslim” societies together, and ignoring Africa, Australia, Central and South America altogether.

The most troubling issue here is the assertion that the non-Western societies somehow have a seemingly more innate understanding of sexuality than the *scientia sexualis* approach of the West. This division furthers the myths surrounding non-Western regions as being “mystical” or that they are steeped in tradition to the point that their societies are somehow frozen in time. Orientalism, as discussed by Edward Said, creates “a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, ‘us’) and the strange (the Orient, the East, ‘them’).”¹⁸ The characteristics that construct this imaginative divide between East and West are posed in opposition to each other. The East is “primitive, childlike, and backward; it is eccentric, irrational, chaotic, and mysterious; it is sensual, sexual, fecund, and despotic.”¹⁹ In contrast, the West is forward-thinking, scientific, mechanical, progressive, reasonable, and enlightened. And due to the East’s supposed un-changing nature, it “was seen as a

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, An Introduction: Volume 1* (New York: Random House, Inc. 1978), 64.

¹⁸ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, Inc. 1978), 43.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 93.

source of regeneration for a Western world caught in an unsettling rise of industrialism and materialism.”²⁰ The East is eroticized and mythologized as a “site of imaginary pilgrimage both for sensual indulgence and physical awakening” as well as “site of unlimited desire and deep generative energies.”²¹ There is a sense of the erotic that the West does not have. This is highly problematic, for many reasons, but particularly in that considering the East as a source of regeneration, as well as having primitive characteristics, essentially erases its histories, particularly the histories of colonialism. “Othering” the East in this way creates a body of assumptions regarding its supposed “never-changing” nature, which then expunges any changes or ruptures colonialism had upon the many cultures of the so-called “East.”

To return to a discussion of neo-burlesque, this “othering” of Eastern cultures unfortunately makes appearances in performances. One particularly blatant example of this that I will dedicate a chapter of this project towards is Dita Von Teese’s “Opium Den” act, where she dresses up as a self-described “dragon lady” and smokes a fake opium pipe onstage, surrounded by other Orientalist stereotypes. This “othering” is then extrapolated to other regions such as Latin America. Anthony Shay points out that discussions of Latin American dances, the geographical region itself is often conflated as one large, pan-Latin American state with interchangeable characteristics: “Stereotypical clothes, rhythms, and other elements of Latin American dances can be interchanged one for the other by those for whom Latin America, as does Edward Said’s Orient, constitutes

²⁰ Jane Desmond, “Dancing Out the Difference: Cultural Imperialism and Ruth St. Denis’s “Radha” of 1906,” *Signs*, Vol.17, no.1 (Autumn, 1991), 40.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

one large undifferentiated place.”²² Essentially, a “Latin identity” is created, but not one grounded in fact. Jane Desmond elaborates upon this by pointing out that the “discourse of racialism that ties nonwhites to the body and to sexuality expands to include Latin American populations of European origin. Racial, cultural, and national identity are blurred, yielding a stereotype of ‘Latin’ along the lines of Carmen Miranda crossed with Ricardo Montalban.”²³

Furthermore, Desmond argues that the spread of Latin American dances, such as the rumba, salsa, and tango, to the United States, allowed Americans to sexualize “oneself through a performance of a ‘hot’ Latin style, of temporarily becoming or playing at being a ‘hot Latin’ oneself...”²⁴ There are also class issues at play, in that many Anglo-Americans fascinated by “sensual dance genres” went “slumming to experience the dangerous sexuality of the other because there one could experience the exotic natives...and then, after the dance, they could safely reassume their comfortable and safe middle class persona as they exited the dance space.”²⁵ Essentially, middle class white Americans could experience the thrill of an illicit encounter with the “exotic other” or even play at being the “exotic other,” without encountering the ramifications of living the experience of being the “other.”

²² Anthony Shay, *Dancing Across Borders: The American Fascination with Exotic Dance Forms* (Jefferson, NC & London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2008), 181.

²³ Ibid., 172.

²⁴ Jane C. Desmond, “Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies,” in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane C. Desmond (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 41.

²⁵ Anthony Shay, *Dancing Across Borders: The American Fascination with Exotic Dance Forms* (Jefferson, NC & London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2008), 178.

This concept of temporarily playing at being an exotic Other as a way to experience the thrill of sexualizing oneself is a very real danger in neo-burlesque, given the privileged position of the educated white female population that occupy so many burlesque stages. As many women look to burlesque as a way to empower themselves and take control of/celebrate their sexuality, an unfortunate byproduct of that quest for self-empowerment can be appropriation and sexualization of other cultures, as well as performances of harmful racial stereotypes. As Foucault noted, Western discourse regarding sexuality has historically been geared towards the scientific approach. While that approach is now critiqued by many feminists, both inside and outside the academic arena, I would argue that in an attempt to escape the Western methods of discourse regarding sexuality (i.e.: viewing sex and sexuality as further methods to study, objectify, and label people, rather than viewing sexuality as something of the “body and soul” that cannot be understood via Western methods of understanding), some neo-burlesque artists are using the appropriation of cultures that they view to be more sexually uninhibited, passionate, or enlightened, and creating a performance persona based on a limited understanding of that culture.

Methodology

As a neo-burlesque artist, this concerns me and has provided me with the impetus for taking on this project. I do not wish to give the impression that I am critiquing neo-burlesque as a way to tear it down. I have immense respect for burlesque artists and I view the critiques that I will offer in these chapters as a labor of love. Additionally, I

hope to offer a more complex critique in the following pages than simply “This artist performs a sexualized version of another culture and this is bad.” Rather, I offer and analyze examples of performances based in an “other” culture that offer different ways and methods of performing these cultures.

For example, my chapter on Dita Von Teese’s “Opium Den” act looks at her performance of an overly sexualized stereotype of Chinese women. My analysis of this act rests largely on the fact that I find her manner and approach to this performance at the level of inexcusable. I admit that I tried to see if there was some level of complexity I could possibly find; I suspect that I hesitated because Dita Von Teese is an internationally renowned neo-burlesque star and it is quite likely that without her work, neo-burlesque would not be nearly as popular as it has become. She is one of the big names that put burlesque back in the popular lexicon and I don’t wish to paint her in a purely negative light. That being said, while analyzing this piece, I found that I simply could not get around the fact that all of my intellectual and instinctual responses found this act to be wildly problematic, if not downright racist. This is further supported by my memory of seeing this act performed live, years before I came to graduate school. Even then, without all of my graduate school education, I still felt that something was not right, even if I could not articulate it as clearly as I can now.

I also searched burlesque blogs, websites, and social media to see if there was well-articulated support for her act, as it had caused quite a stir in the burlesque community when several performers made statements on social media, calling out Dita

Von Teese for her harmful portrayal of Chinese women. I found that the few people who did not seem to find the act offensive essentially rested their argument on the premise that she's an artist and has the right to freedom of expression, or on the idea that she glamorized Chinese women by dressing up and performing as one. I find both these arguments flimsy at best. Freedom of expression is a tenuous concept in and of itself, and coating an Orientalist stereotype in sequins and Swarovski crystals does not make it palatable.

I also examine boylesque performer, Jett Adore, and his "Zorro" act through the lens articulated by Desmond and Shay regarding performances and sexualization of Latin America. However, I also argue that there is a level of complexity to Jett Adore's performance that Dita Von Teese lacks. Namely, Jett Adore's performance includes a layered combination of gendered gestures and behaviors that are woven together in ways that complicate our reading of his performance. At first glance, it is easy to read his act as a stereotype of the over-sexualized Latin male, but I argue that this reading would overlook the complexities at play in his act. Whether those complexities are able to completely subvert the Zorro stereotype is a matter for further discussion and I am not necessarily invested in completely resolving that question. I am more interested in the teasing out of these complexities and noting some of the ways they perform various functions.

Finally, I analyze a performance by Calamity Chang, a Chinese-American neo-burlesque performer based in New York City. In this act, she performs a version of Hello

Kitty that I've certainly never seen before! Using heavy metal parody band, Steel Panther's song "Asian Hooker," Calamity Chang aims to undermine racist stereotypes of Asian women as sexually available for white male consumption, essentially providing an unintentional foil to that of Dita Von Teese's performance.

I have also chosen to "book-end" this project with autobiographical accounts of my own experience as a neo-burlesque artist. I think that positioning myself as part of this community is an important aspect to my research, particularly given how much my own experience and knowledge influences my perspectives. And as I have stated, I consider this project to be another method to contribute something of value (I hope) to the burlesque community. Neo-burlesque is still a relatively young art form in and of itself, as its popularity began reviving in the early 1990s and I would argue has really taken off in the past decade or so. I feel that because there are so many new artists and groups wanting to jump into this glittery performance arena, it is absolutely imperative that we have these conversations. There cannot be growth without discourse and complex, nuanced critiques. I fervently believe in the possibilities neo-burlesque has to offer, which is why it is even more important that we as artists take the time to really reflect upon and dig into the kind of art we are creating. By doing so, we stand a better chance of making truly boundary-breaking art.

CHAPTER III

STRIPPING THE STEREOTYPE: DITA VON TEESE'S "OPIUM DEN"

Dita Von Teese is an internationally renowned neo-burlesque performer, arguably the most well-known name in the burlesque world. She is also often credited as being a major force in bringing burlesque back to the stage. Her website describes her as “the biggest name in burlesque in the world since Gypsy Rose Lee” and is credited with bringing the art form back into the spotlight with a new sense of elegance and sophistication. Taking audiences on a “journey into fantasy and spectacle, Dita is renowned for her ornate sets and dazzling haute-couture performance costumes adorned with hundreds of thousands of Swarovski crystals. This “Burlesque Superheroine” (Vanity Fair) is the performer of choice at high profile events including those for designers such as Marc Jacobs, Christian Louboutin, Louis Vuitton, Chopard, and Cartier, and was the first guest star in history at Paris’ famed Crazy Horse (established in 1951) where she has performed several sold-out runs. In addition to her burlesque shows, Dita is a self-styled fashion icon, topping best-dressed lists all over the world.”²⁶

I saw Dita Von Teese perform her (in)famous “Opium Den” act in her “Strip, Strip, Hooray” show at the New Orleans House of Blues on July 26, 2011. This act is considered fairly controversial in large part because of the Chinese stereotypes apparent

²⁶ Dita Von Teese, “Burlesque,” www.dita.net/glamour-girl/burlesque (Accessed February 6, 2015).

in her performance. Her website lists a description, along with a 30 second promotional video, describing this act:

Billowing smoke veils the stage...as it slowly clears, a magnificent sparkling opium den becomes visible. Through the shadowy haze lounges a smoldering and exotic dragon lady, resplendent in a trailing Swarovski crystal Cheongsam embellished with long gleaming crystal tassels appears. She puffs from a sparkling opium pipe. As she slowly becomes entranced by the poisonous smoke, she seductively reveals herself layer by layer, dancing with an enormous crystal-covered Chinese fan. With every puff, the opium-induced delirium provokes a salacious dance that escalates as she is beckoned by four mysterious arms that work her body into an erotic frenzy, and a shower of red cherry blossoms falls from above.²⁷

In this short, adjective-laden, hyperbolic paragraph, there appear perhaps almost too many stereotypes to count. The use of the “Chinese fan,” the Cheongsam (a one piece, body-hugging dress worn predominantly by upper-class Chinese women), the red cherry blossoms, tassels, the opium pipe, the “mysterious arms” gloved in red satin...all of these are stereotypes closely associated with the eroticization and sexualization of Asian cultures, particularly Asian women. Additionally, the enormous set pieces feature red-orange Chinese lanterns and ornate red and black screens with Asian calligraphy painted over the red material. It casts a red-orange glow over the stage, catching the sparkle of thousands of Swarovski crystals coating Dita’s dress, as well as highlighting the red sparkles covering the dragon design placed on the dress’ left shoulder. To complete the costume, her black hair is swept up in an ornate up-do accessorized with two red chopsticks decorated with a tiny lantern and a glittery red tassel. A sprig of cherry

²⁷ Dita Von Teese, “Burlesque,” www.dita.net/glamour-girl/burlesque (Accessed February 2, 2015).

blossoms completes her hairstyle. Her eye make-up even attempts to create the illusion that the outside corners of her eyes are slanted.

The act begins with Dita Von Teese reclining on a pile of luxurious cushions, framed by the black and red rectangular screen that encloses her den, smoking her crystal-covered pipe. Music that sounds like it was yanked straight from the soundtrack of the movie “Memoirs of a Geisha” blares from the sound system, complete with gong crashes. The red-orange light cast by the lanterns is hazy, thanks to the theatrical smoke spiraling in lazy clouds about the stage. She glances towards the audience, acknowledging them with a seductive stare and puffs of smoke from her red lips. A bright spotlight makes the thousands of Swarovski crystals covering her dress shine. She slowly, lazily, slides from the pillows and rises to her feet, strapped in tall red stilettos. She walks about the stage as if in an opiate-induced haze, though I personally do not know of many people who could sexily strut across the stage while laced into a tight dress and wearing high heels, after having taken hallucinogenic drugs. She rolls her wrists and fingers in ways that seem to attempt to be reminiscent of Chinese classical dance gestures, but she lacks the specificity and intention of someone who has actually studied any form of Chinese classical or folk dances. Again, I find myself wondering if she lifted some of her movements directly from watching “Memoirs of a Geisha” too many times.

She sways her hips from side to side, teasing the audience with glimpses of a leg, a shoulder, a wrist. To tantalize the audience further, she gives them a long, lingering stare, then pivots to slowly walk back upstage, coyly glancing back over her shoulder as

if to ask if the audience would like to follow her. Once a little more distance has been established, she again faces the audience and pulls on a red cord along the waistline of her dress, little by little removing the skirt from its attachment to the top of the dress. Her long, very white legs are revealed and the audience cheers for more. After another few moments of teasing, she again turns her back, unclasps the bodice, and rolls her shoulders to slowly slide the sleeves down her arms. She playfully tosses away the dress top, now standing clad in her strappy red stilettos, a bedazzled red thong decorated with little red tassels, and a sparkly half-bra that reveals most of her breasts, including the red tassel pasties covering her nipples. A black and red crystal-covered waist corset that stops in the middle of her rib cage cinches her already small waistline even smaller.

After removing and tossing aside the waist corset, Dita reaches inside the frame of her pillow-lined den for her next prop: a giant black fan. She holds it, still closed, across her chest, hiding her breasts. As she coyly shifts her weight from hip to hip, in a move reminiscent of a 1930s Ziegfeld Follies showgirl, she reaches one hand underneath the fan. Without the audience realizing how she manages this maneuver, she unhooks her bedazzled bra and removes it, pulling it out from under the fan. The audience shouts their approval as she twirls the bra by one end, flinging it away once its purpose has been fulfilled. She unfurls the fan, revealing that its sheer black fabric is decorated with an ornate dragon design outlined and filled by yet more silver crystals. The dragon catches the stage lights, shimmering and glimmering against the sheer black cloth of the fan.

Dita hides her body behind the unfurled fan, only shoulders and head fully visible. The audience can catch glimpses of her nearly nude-body through the sheer fan, but the dragon obscures most of the view. She takes full advantage of the opportunities to tease the audience, moving the fan from side to side to reveal, then quickly conceals herself behind the dragon. Sometimes she even goes so far as to fully reveal a leg or an arm, but it is only for a brief moment. The tease and anticipation of her next move keeps the audience cheering and clamoring for more.

After a minute or so, she closes the fan and lays it on the stage, backing into the den. She picks up the sparkly pipe again, taking a few puffs as if wanting to make sure her high doesn't wear off too soon. As she smokes, the music builds and four red satin-gloved arms appear from the back of the den behind her, reaching and beckoning her into their embrace. As the music continues to crescendo, the disembodied hands (which I must admit I found to be rather ominous when I saw this performed live, and still find to be rather sinister) grab ahold of her waist, pulling her back into the den's frame. They stroke her waist, shoulders, hips, and breasts as she writhes in their grasp, seemingly in pleasure. Red petals begin falling from the ceiling as the music's tempo picks up. At first, only a few petals float through the air at a time, gently alighting on the floor, then more and more and more and more, until finally, at the peak of the music, there is a climactic explosion of red cherry blossom petals that fills the stage. They cascade through the air, falling on the audience and coating the floor of the stage as the curtains close on Dita Von Teese's opium den.

Orientalism Onstage

It is not difficult to see this act as a highly problematic sexualization of Chinese women. She lumps a disturbingly impressive number of stereotypes into one piece that lasts less than ten minutes: the fan, Cheongsam, music, tassels, hair chopsticks, make-up, red cherry blossom flowers and petals, and of course, the opium den. While some of her fans have argued that this act actually glamorizes China and is therefore not problematic, I do not find this argument convincing. The fact is that “Dita’s act concentrates on a historically destructive aspect of China-opium, reducing the enormity of opium’s effect on China to a mere sparkly prop.”²⁸ There is nothing glamorous about the use of opiates, or China’s history with opium. Attempting to make that history “sexy” is wildly disrespectful, to put it extremely mildly.

To reference Edward Said’s discussion of Orientalism, I would argue that Dita Von Teese’s “Opium Den” act is a clear illustration of “a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, ‘us’) and the strange (the Orient, the East, ‘them’).”²⁹ She is performing an unfamiliar “other” in this act, transforming herself into a “Chinese” woman and laying artistic claim to a culture that is not hers, which creates “a relationship of power, of domination, and of varying degrees of cultural hegemony.”³⁰ She, as a wealthy white woman, holds a very specific place of privilege that allows her to perform her version of this culture. As pointed out by

²⁸ “How Far is Too Far? A Word on Dita,” <http://dirtyfemmeburlesque.wordpress.com/2012/05/25/how-far-is-too-far-a-word-on-dita> (Accessed December 3, 2014).

²⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, Inc. 1978), 43.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

Edward Said, “a certain freedom of intercourse was always the Westerner’s privilege; because his was the stronger culture, he could penetrate, he could wrestle with, he could give shape and meaning to the great Asiatic mystery...”³¹ And by performing the “mysterious” or “exotic” Chinese woman, she is contributing to and reinforcing the bodies of assumptions and fantasies regarding the “Orient” and “Oriental” women.

The subject of the “Eastern” or “Oriental” woman has its own litany of stereotypes, many of which Dita Von Teese embodies. Most clearly, “in white Western discourse, both nonwhites and non-Westerners are coded as extremely or excessively sexual.”³² While I wish to be clear that I am not interested in condemning “excessive” sexuality, (or to use a more colloquial phrase, I am not interested in “slut-shaming”) it is problematic when a white woman chooses to portray a Chinese woman in this hyper-sexualized manner. Due to the histories of colonialism and racism, particularly in the United States, it merely continues to add to these hegemonic bodies of knowledge in which Chinese women are portrayed as excessively sexual due to the nature of being considered “exotic.”

To further elaborate with a historical example, during the lead-up and subsequent passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, “at first seen as exotic curiosities from a distant land, Chinese immigrants soon came to be viewed as threats, especially as

³¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, Inc. 1978), 44.

³² Jane Desmond, “Dancing Out the Difference: Cultural Imperialism and Ruth St. Denis’s “Radha” of 1906,” *Signs*, Vol.17, no.1 (Autumn, 1991), 46.

Chinese immigration increased throughout the gold rush period.”³³ In an effort to stem immigration, arguments were formed to support ideas that Chinese were undesirable:

Many of the arguments in favor of restricting Chinese immigrants also hinged explicitly on gender and sexuality...with Chinese women symbolizing some of the most fundamental differences between the West and the ‘Far East.’ The almost 900 Chinese prostitutes in California in 1870 came to represent a sexualized danger with the power to subvert both the domestic ideal and the existing relations between white heterosexual men and women. Their mere presence made possible the crossing of racial and class lines and renewed fears of ‘moral and racial pollution.’ Chinese prostitutes were also believed to carry more virulent strains of venereal disease that had the power to ‘poison Anglo-Saxon blood.’ They allegedly not only threatened the morals of the larger society but, as exclusionists argued, could also cause its downfall.³⁴

It was not enough to claim that Chinese women somehow carried stronger diseases that Anglo-Americans could not fight off; the entire Chinese population had to be portrayed as dirty, diseased, and addicted to opium. Chinese immigrants were “characterized repeatedly in terms of ‘excess’...The references in terms of excess and extremes stood in menacing contrast to the presumed norms of the white middle class. The danger of excess lay in its perceived capacity to expand across class and racial differences and spatial boundaries, carrying lethal contagion.”³⁵ Lurid accounts of Chinatown populations in California, notably San Francisco, helped paint vivid pictures for white Americans of the undesirability of Chinese immigrants and their living conditions:

³³ Erika Lee, “The Chinese Are Coming. How Can We Stop Them? Chinese Exclusion and the Origins of American Gatekeeping,” in *Asian-American Studies Now*, ed. Jean Yu-Wen Shen Wu & Thomas C. Chen (New Brunswick & London: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 145.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 145-146.

³⁵ Nayan Shah, “Public Health and the Mapping of Chinatown,” in *Asian-American Studies Now*, ed. Jean Yu-Wen Shen Wu & Thomas C. Chen (New Brunswick & London: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 172.

Descend into the basement of almost any building in Chinatown at night; pick your way by the aid of the police-man's candle along the dark and narrow passageway, black and grimy with a quarter of a century's accumulation of filth; step with care lest you fall into a cesspool of sewage abominations with which these subterranean depths abound...The air is thick with smoke and fetid with an indescribable odor of reeking vapors...It is a sense of horror you have never experienced, revolting to the last degree...Through this semi-opaque atmosphere, you discover perhaps eight or ten—never less than two or three--bunks, the greater part or all of which occupied by two persons, some in a state of stupefaction from opium, some rapidly smoking themselves into that condition, and all in dirt and filth.³⁶

Nayan Shah notes that of course, these “fact-gathering” expeditions into Chinatown had to be “conducted at night, when the ‘true character’ of the quarter—with its gambling houses, opium dens, and brothels—revealed itself.” More visible sites, such as “merchants’ homes, dry goods stores, temples, meeting rooms, and Chinese opera theaters” were ignored in these expeditions, as these sites “offered little evidence of filth, sickness, and pathology that demanded medical evaluation.”³⁷ Obviously, these explorations were meant to only portray Chinese immigrants in one light: that of those inhabiting the “lowest dens of degraded bestiality” where the unventilated atmosphere was also conflated with the “moral degradation of opium smoking, gambling, and prostitution.”³⁸ By placing her act in a glamorous bedazzled “opium den,” Dita Von Teese ignores the history behind the “othering” of Chinese immigrants. American health and government officials depicted San Francisco’s Chinatown as a series of “serpentine

³⁶ Nayan Shah, “Public Health and the Mapping of Chinatown,” in *Asian-American Studies Now*, ed. Jean Yu-Wen Shen Wu & Thomas C. Chen (New Brunswick & London: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 186.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 177.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 178.

and subterranean passageways...and tangled maze of narrow streets and dark alleys,”³⁹ to sensationalize the dark mysteries that surrounded the supposed dirt and disease infesting Chinese communities, vices personified particularly by opium addicts and prostitutes. Dita Von Teese also portrays an opium den as a mysterious entity, shrouded in a physical and metaphorical haze, to add allure and sensuality to her performance. Both of these portrayals directly contribute to highly problematic and damaging stereotypes regarding Chinese women.

Alongside this construction of Chinese immigrants as diseased, dirty, and addicted to opium, the image of Chinese women as readily available for white male consumption was constructed via colonialism and war:

Colonialism did in its turn affect the gender images of Asia...Of course the first generations of seafarers, traders, and settlers consisted primarily of men, who took the habit of contracting informal ‘temporary marriages’ with locals, if not abusing them outright. Here again, the victims were blamed for the transgressions, and the same patterns persisted long after proper European wives were brought over to form proper European families with proper European children. After colonial rule began to recede, successive ‘allied’ wars brought waves of millions of Western soldiers to the Pacific Rim. Their hard currencies in turn lured millions of women into prostitution. But here again, the harsh realities of the sex industry were glossed over by images of local girls who were just ‘happy go lucky’ and ‘eager to please’. European popular novels from the nineteenth century on—and American movies from the twentieth century on—are shot through with marked versions of these same themes and characters to this day, to such an extent that both directors and audiences have come to think of them as ‘real’ and ‘natural,’ and are often unaware of where these fantasies come from.⁴⁰

³⁹ Nayan Shah, “Public Health and the Mapping of Chinatown,” in *Asian-American Studies Now*, ed. Jean Yu-Wen Shen Wu & Thomas C. Chen (New Brunswick & London: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 177.

⁴⁰ Jaap van Ginneken, *Screening Difference: how Hollywood’s Blockbuster Films Imagine Race, Ethnicity, and Culture*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), 110.

A glaring current-day example of this depiction of Asian women as sexually available is a disturbing TV commercial for the online dating site, AsianDate.com. (Equally disturbing is the fact that this dating site exists in the first place.) This 30 second commercial beckons the viewer in with the promise that “For thousands of years, the women of Asia have been mastering the art of the welcome, warmth, and kindness. You can see it in their eyes, feel it in their smile. Expand your world of dating with women from Asia.” The video description also entices the viewer with the line “Learn what it means to be truly appreciated in a fun and secure environment on Asian Date.”⁴¹

Terrible grammar aside, this commercial is literally selling Asian women. The reference to “mastering the art of the welcome” is perhaps a reference to the geisha traditions made popular by Hollywood and subsequently generalized to encompass all Asian cultures. The women featured are all light-skinned, with brown eyes, straight, shiny dark hair, and impeccable make-up that visually makes their eyes appear larger and lips redder. Their eyes are mostly downcast with a seemingly shy glance up to the camera, accompanied by a small, demure smile. They don’t speak a word; all the lines are spoken in a voice-over, implying that these women cannot or should not speak. It is perfectly acceptable for someone, presumably someone white, to speak for them as they stand in place, surrounded by lush greenery and red lanterns, and look pretty for the viewer. They are, thanks to the Internet, available for American men looking to “expand their world of dating” by dating an “exotic” Asian woman. There is no question of whether or not the Asian women they contact through this dating site might refuse their

⁴¹ Youtube, “Asian Date: Expand Your World of Dating,” www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_bGjxVQS-4.

advances. All the man has to do is go through this dating site to meet Asian women who have mastered “the art of the welcome,” whatever that phrase even means.

This depiction of Chinese, as well as other Asian women, as sexually available for white men and “eager to please” ties directly into Dita Von Teese’s “Opium Den” persona. Indeed, the last part of her act greatly concerns me, as it concludes with four disembodied hands appearing and stroking her body to a climactic finish. They reach from behind her and seem to envelop her body, taking away her ability to engage consensually in this act. Her body becomes visually entrapped both by the frame of the den and by the physical grip of the hands, which form a sort of cage around her torso. The hands’ movements seem to manipulate her body and her movements, rather than her having agency and control over how her body moves. The identity of the person attached to the hands does not matter; her body is portrayed as available to anyone. And while I realize that there are people for whom the idea of engaging in sexual activities with a stranger is exciting, it is still problematic to portray that particular fetish in this context, due to the stereotypes painting Asian women as excessively sexual as well as available for white men’s desires and fantasies. In this act, the “mute colonized female body represents the sensuality of both the “female” and the Orient.”⁴²

By performing highly eroticized version of an Asian woman, Dita Von Teese also continues the tradition of constructing the East as the afore-mentioned “site of imaginary

⁴² Jane Desmond, “Dancing Out the Difference: Cultural Imperialism and Ruth St. Denis’s “Radha” of 1906,” *Signs*, Vol.17, no.1 (Autumn, 1991), 41.

pilgrimage both for sensual indulgence and physical awakening.”⁴³ By embodying this “other” site of unlimited, primal sensuality and indulgence without also taking on the inherent problems of doing so, Dita Von Teese constructs the non-West as a site where primal, sensual truth is understood in ways that are free from the oppressions that shape Western discourse and attitudes towards sensuality and sexuality. The image of her body entrapped by disembodied hands is far too potent. It sticks in my memory: a wealthy white woman dressing up as a bedazzled Chinese woman, body pliant and available, gripped by unseen bodies. Dita Von Teese can escape the consequences of inhabiting the body of the exotic Other she portrays as soon as she steps offstage. But the “colonized female body” of “the Orient” remains.

⁴³ Jane Desmond, “Dancing Out the Difference: Cultural Imperialism and Ruth St. Denis’s “Radha” of 1906,” *Signs*, Vol.17, no.1 (Autumn, 1991), 41.

CHAPTER IV

STRIPPING (AWAY) THE STEREOTYPE: JETT ADORE'S "ZORRO"

Jett Adore is a member of the Chicago boylesque troupe, The Stage Door Johnnies. With monikers such as "The Diamond Stud" and "The No-Pantser Romancer," he is known for his opulent, theatrical performances and has headlined burlesque festivals across the United States as well as internationally. Additionally, he has won numerous awards, including "Most Innovative 2011" at the Las Vegas Burlesque Hall of Fame, as well as 2012 "World's Best Duo" with Frenchie Kiss, also at the Las Vegas Burlesque Hall of Fame.⁴⁴ Described by Seattle burlesque artist, Kitten LaRue as , "a perfect specimen of male glory...he makes everything look flawless and effortless, as only someone who puts so much care and energy into their craft can. Boys, THIS is your standard."⁴⁵

Jett Adore has performed his famous "Zorro" act in venues across the country to wide acclaim. It is arguably one of his most well-known acts. The specific performance of this act that I will be analyzing took place at the 2nd Annual New Orleans Burlesque

⁴⁴ The Stage Door Johnnies, "Jett Adore," www.thestagedoorjohnnies.com/thestagedoorjohnnies.com/Jett_Adore.html (Accessed February 6, 2015).

⁴⁵ Kitten LaRue, "The New York Burlesque Festival 2014," www.21stcenturyburlesque.com/new-york-boylesque-festival-2014-kitten-larue (Accessed February 6, 2015).

Festival in 2010.⁴⁶ It begins on a dark stage, with audience members spontaneously whistling or cheering. As the theme music from the “Mask of Zorro” movie blares, a spotlight appears on Jett Adore, standing center stage, legs planted wide and hands firmly on hips. He wears fitted black pants, a sparkly long-sleeved shirt, and tall white cowboy boots. A black, wide-brimmed hat with a pale pink rose attached to the brim is perched on his head, and a long black cape lined with pale pink swirls about his shoulders. To complete the picture of mystery and allure, a black mask covers the upper portion of his face.

As a guitar begins to strum along with a rhythmic clapping reminiscent of flamenco, Jett Adore confidently strides to the front of the stage, which still remains quite dark. With the spotlight as the only source of light onstage, the audience is treated to faint glimpses of his shadowy form and sweeping cape billowing about the stage. Another spotlight appears as he stamps his boots in time to the music, holding his cape open to contrast the pale pink lining with his black costume that sparkles in the light. He dramatically unsheathes a long silver sword, which he then begins to use to slash away his shirt and pants, until only the boots, cape, and mask remain.

How exactly he does so remains a mystery to the audience, as he has turned his back and the cape hides his actions. The audience only hears the whipping noise of the sword, immediately followed by the ripping and tearing sounds of cloth. Suddenly a naked arm or leg appears, and then disappears again behind the cape. Clothes are flung

⁴⁶ Jett Adore, “2nd Annual New Orleans Burlesque Festival,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NRFeGNBGBAU> (Accessed February 6, 2015).

haphazardly every which way and his hat goes flying off. On cue with a break in the music, he pauses with his back to the audience, sword held straight out to the side. He bends to retrieve his hat, placing it back on his head, carefully adjusting it, still with his back to the audience. He slowly turns to face the crowd, one hand holding the cape over his body, the other hand pointing at the audience with his outstretched sword. The pink rose has come detached from his hat and is now awkwardly clutched in his teeth. As a performer, part of me wonders if the loss of his hat was choreographed or if it was one of those on-stage accidents that just happen and you deal with it as best you can. Because the stage is dark when his hat comes off, it is hard to tell. Either way, the effect is both funny and over-the-top.

He slides the sword away, done with the prop for now. With both hands free to strategically hold and place the edges of the cape, he begins to move about the stage in larger spatial patterns, manipulating the cape to hide or reveal parts of his body, much like Dita Von Teese used her fan to hide and reveal her body. The excited, boisterous audience gets flashes of leg, a few moments of an exposed torso, and a tantalizing “almost, but not quite” look at Jett Adore’s bare booty. He works the audience into a cheering frenzy, then dramatically turns his back and throws open the cape.

With a dramatic musical crescendo, Jett Adore slowly lowers the cape, revealing a sparkly pink Z inscribed upon his back, and the full stage lights come up, illuminating a midnight blue sky encrusted with glittery stars. All the while, the audience is screaming and cheering madly for more. He wraps the cape around his hips and leisurely slides

down into the splits, an exceptionally difficult feat of flexibility that he performs with stunning grace and control. The audience promptly goes wild.

Once he reaches the floor, he carefully rolls to his back, smoothly using his feet and hands to wrap the cape so that it covers just the bare minimum. In a pose reminiscent of 1940's pin-up girls, he lazily extends one leg into the air, coyly twirling it in small circles and shimmying his shoulders a little bit. Meanwhile, the rose is still clutched in his teeth. He prostrates himself on his back, chest rising and falling with each dramatic inhale and exhale. He finally removes the large pink rose from his mouth, and romantically plucks its petals as though partaking in the age-old "He loves me, he loves me not" guessing game, eventually showering himself in handfuls of the soft pink petals.

He makes his way to his feet and resumes using his cape as a tool to hide and reveal his body. He glides across the stage, strategically swirling the cape around himself to hide first one body part, then another. This time, he has maneuvered the cape so that he stands astride of it, so his torso, one leg, and shoulders are always exposed. At this point, he is mostly using the cape to hide his genitals, maybe one leg, but not much else. He skillfully teases the audience, revealing more and more, coupling dramatic looks over his shoulder with wide stances, an interesting contrast to Dita Von Teese who kept her stances underneath herself. The music continues to crescendo, and he swings the cape over one arm as he removes the hat from his head. Now that the cape cannot cover him, he uses the hat to cover his pelvis when he faces the audience and his butt when he faces away. He glides across the stage, then pitches the hat aside, just as he did the sword

earlier. As the music comes to a final crescendo, he swirls the cape back around his waist, gives the audience a long stare, then throws the cape open to reveal sparkly streamers and a tiny bow tie covering his *ahem* second sword. The audience cheers loudly as he steps forward, untying the mask covering his face, completing the full reveal at last.

A Different Kind of Zorro?

It might be easy to characterize Jett Adore's performance as a representation of the romanticized exotic Latin lover stereotype. After all, there is a long, complex history of American fascination with "exotic" dances of Latin America, such as the rumba, salsa, and tango. At first look, there are a lot of stereotypes at play, such as music and costuming, which ties directly to the treatment of how Americans often portray or embody "Latinness." Often, "stereotypical clothes, rhythms, and other elements of Latin American dances can be interchanged one for the other by those for whom Latin America, as does Edward Said's Orient, constitutes one large undifferentiated place."⁴⁷ Essentially, a "Latin identity" is created, but not one grounded in location, culture, or even fact. And as Jane C. Desmond points out, a "discourse of racialism that ties nonwhites to the body and to sexuality expands to include Latin American populations of European origin. Racial, cultural, and national identity are blurred, yielding a stereotype of 'Latin' along the lines of Carmen Miranda crossed with Ricardo Montalban... The ascription of sexuality (or dangerous, potentially overwhelming sexuality) to subordinate classes and 'races' or to groups of specific national origin (blacks, 'Latins,' and other

⁴⁷ Anthony Shay, *Dancing Across Borders: The American Fascination with Exotic Dance Forms* (Jefferson, NC & London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2008), 181.

such lumped together terms to denote non-Anglo-European ancestry) yields such descriptions as ‘fiery,’ ‘hot,’ ‘sultry,’ ‘passionate.’⁴⁸ These dances are “regarded by many mainstream Americans as sexual: curved rather than square, rotating pelvises and flexible torsos rather than upright and uptight spines.”⁴⁹

Furthermore, Desmond argues that the spread of Latin American dances, such as the rumba and tango, to the United States, allowed Americans to sexualize “oneself through a performance of a ‘hot’ Latin style, of temporarily becoming or playing at being a ‘hot Latin’ oneself, experience sexuality, especially sexuality associated with subtle, sensuous rotations of the pelvis.”⁵⁰ The effect of this process is “often to reinforce U.S. stereotypes of Latin Americans as overly emotional, inefficient, unorganized, and pleasure-seeking. The very same qualities that may be valued in the movement--characterized in the United States as sensuous, romantic, expressive, emotional, heteroerotic, and passionate—reinforce these stereotypes even while they contribute to the perception of the dance in those same terms. (The unstated equation is that Latins are how they dance, and they dance how they are.)”⁵¹ There are also class issues at play, in that many Anglo-Americans fascinated by “sensual dance genres” went “slumming to experience the dangerous sexuality of the other because there one could experience the exotic natives...and then, after the dance, they could safely reassume their comfortable

⁴⁸ Jane C. Desmond, “Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies,” in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane C. Desmond (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 41.

⁴⁹ Anthony Shay, *Dancing Across Borders: The American Fascination with Exotic Dance Forms* (Jefferson, NC & London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2008), 172.

⁵⁰ Jane C. Desmond, “Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies,” in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane C. Desmond (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 41.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

and safe middle class persona as they exited the dance space.”⁵² Essentially, middle class white Americans could experience the thrill of an illicit encounter with the “exotic other” or even play at being the “exotic other,” without encountering the ramifications of actually living the experience of being the “other.”

As stated earlier, it is easy to see all of these things described by Shay and Desmond as appearing in Jett Adore’s “Zorro” burlesque act. However, I think that doing so, in fact, oversimplifies this performance and ignores many of the complexities being played out onstage. Unlike Dita Von Teese, whose performance of the “exotic Orient” does not really stray outside of the heteronormative, white power structures it is so firmly based in, I would argue that Jett Adore’s performance is more complex, particularly in regards to how he plays with coded gendered movements.

To elaborate on this idea of gendered movement and performance, Judith Butler asserts that “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*.”⁵³ This is to say, gender is not a fixed identity that we are born with, but a “constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief. If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender

⁵² Anthony Shay, *Dancing Across Borders: The American Fascination with Exotic Dance Forms* (Jefferson, NC & London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2008), 178.

⁵³ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no.4 (1988), 519.

transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style.”⁵⁴ Gender is not a fixed, immobile identity tied to our biological sex, but rather, a social construction of various acts that we perform every day. Indeed, the act of “doing gender” is a historical concept that has not remained fixed, for “living styles have a history, and that history conditions and limits possibilities.”⁵⁵

This performance is layered with masculine/feminine imagery and movement. At a basic level, Jett Adore is a masculine body occupying a female-dominated sphere. While “boylesque” is a rapidly growing phenomenon within the neo-burlesque community, burlesque performance has historically been dominated by female performers, so it already subverts our expectations when we see a male body taking the stage. His costume is black, a color often associated with mystery and allure, as seen in the black-caped and masked character of Zorro in the movie series starring Antonio Banderas and Catherine Zeta-Jones.⁵⁶ In contrast to Banderas’ all-black ensemble, there are soft pastel pink highlights throughout Jett Adore’s costume, such as the cape lining and the pink Z on his back. Pink, of course, is a color girls are taught to gravitate towards at a young age and boys are discouraged from. (Look through just about any catalog for children’s clothing and toys for proof of that.) Jett Adore also first brandishes a long sword, a highly phallic image to be sure, but then later exchanges the sword for a pink

⁵⁴Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no.4 (1988), 520.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 521.

⁵⁶ *The Mask of Zorro*, directed by Martin Campbell. (United States; TriStar Picturese, 1998), DVD.

rose. An intriguing choice, given the rose's associations as the symbol of love and romance, as well as a symbol for female genitalia.

His use of the cape also provides many masculine/feminine images. The cape dramatically billows about as he sweeps across the stage, increasing the mystery and allure of his persona. Yet, in using it to strategically cover and uncover parts of his body, his use of the cape also recalls something burlesque is well-known for: the fan dance, which is traditionally performed by women. The fan dance's very "invention" is credited to Sally Rand, a classic burlesque performer and silent movie actress from the 1930's. In this dance, the performer uses giant fans traditionally made from ostrich feathers to create visual spectacles and illusions. The fans are used to cover and uncover parts of the body as the performer moves about the stage, teasing the audience with glimpses of their body, until the final moment of full reveal, where the fans are held open or above the head, completely unveiling the performer. Jett Adore's use of the cape to tease the audience with carefully choreographed glimpses of his body is highly reminiscent of the fan dance.

David Gere's article "29 Effeminate Gestures: Choreographer Joe Goode and the Heroism of Effeminacy" provides further fodder for discussing Jett Adore's gendered movements. Gere examines postmodern choreographer Joe Goode's solo work "29 Effeminate Gestures," a choreographed series of gestures which "comments upon gender-specific behavior, theorizing the efficacy of effeminacy in the process."⁵⁷ I wish to draw particular attention to Gere's discussion of the use of hands and fingers in effeminate

⁵⁷ David Gere, "29 Effeminate Gestures: Choreographer Joe Goode and the Heroism of Effeminacy," in *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities On & Off the Stage*, edited by Jane C. Desmond (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 352.

gesture. In describing Joe Goode's arm gesture where "the arm is now broken at the wrist, fingers fluttering in a perky 1940s wave," Gere points out that this movement is "largely coded in the West to mean gay. Every boy knows that the broken wrist implies weakness," and that "masculine fingers never flutter; they are open, flat, unarticulated. Masculine fingers are stiff."⁵⁸

Gere also describes the prescribed postures and gestures acceptable for masculine behavior, keeping in mind that this "applies to a boy who was brought up in the 1960s and 1970s in a lower to middle-class white community..." Examples of male gesture behavior include that "the arms are to be held down at all times...Curves are to be avoided at all costs. To curve is to be expressive, and to be physically expressive is forbidden...Fingers are to be held inward, toward the body, concealed...All loose appendages must be kept under strict control. Arms may be tied in a protective knot. Fists-not the open hand, mind you-may be planted on the hips...or hands may be clasped behind the back, preferably while puffing out the chest."⁵⁹

Jett Adore's performance displays a mash-up of these coded behaviors. His strong stances, legs planted wide and chest thrust forward, coupled with commanding strides across the stage, are the very picture of Western masculinity. But meanwhile, he subverts this by using his hands and fingers in ways that David Gere has defined as "effeminate." For example, instead of holding his hands in fists or keeping his fingers straight, Jett

⁵⁸ David Gere, "29 Effeminate Gestures: Choreographer Joe Goode and the Heroism of Effeminacy," in *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities On & Off the Stage*, edited by Jane C. Desmond (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 357.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 350-351.

Adore uses his hands and fingers in a more delicate manner. They pluck petals from a rose, caress parts of his body, or lightly hold the edge of his hat or cape. His pinkies are often extended and wrists broken. His arms sweep open, their expressive capabilities put to full use. These “effeminate” gestures, coupled with masculine postures personify the “playful abuse of gender stereotypes” as well as “criticism of hetero-normative genders”⁶⁰ that characterizes many neo-burlesque performances. He performs both male and female constructions of gender within this act, dancing back and forth over the line that denotes the male/female binary.

I would argue that this mashup and “playful abuse” of gendered behaviors and movements add a layer of complexity to Jett Adore’s act that cannot and should not be overlooked in this discussion. To again use the example of the Zorro portrayed onscreen by Antonio Banderas, there is no question regarding Banderas’ masculinity. While his feats of strength and daring are completed with perhaps more grace and finesse than the brute force associated with the Anglo-American cowboy, there is still no question regarding his manliness, particularly given that his love interest is played by British actress, Catherine Zeta-Jones, a woman named by *People* magazine to be one of “The 50 Most Beautiful People in the World” in 1998.

Jett Adore’s “Zorro” may take on the romanticized Latin lover persona, but his play with gender subverts the heterosexual norms ascribed to the persona. There is masculinity, yes, but also a great deal of feminine behaviors. His use and exchange of the

⁶⁰ Claire Nally, “Grrry hurly burly: neo-burlesque and the performance of gender.” *Textual Practice*, vol. 20, no. 4 (2009), 621, 625.

long sword for the pink rose is one example. In comparison, Antonio Banderas' Zorro uses his sword perhaps most notably to literally cut away Catherine Zeta-Jones' clothing after he disarms her in a swordfight. A swordfight in which it is worth noting that he twice plants a kiss on her mouth with a very clear absence of consent on her part. Apparently her character is supposed to find these behaviors alluring, intriguing, and seductive. I have to say I find it rather alarming, given that he had broken into her home, stolen something, and she was in the process of defending herself against a potentially deadly weapon.

In contrast, Jett Adore uses his sword to cut away his own clothing, rather than that of an unwilling woman, exposing his own body rather than another's. He then literally tosses away the phallic prop for the feminine rose, embracing the feminine over the masculine object. And instead of perhaps handing the rose to a (female) audience member as a way of wooing a potential lover, as Banderas' Zorro might do, he keeps it for himself, playing the petal-plucking "He loves me, he loves me not" game.

He borrows poses from pin-up models, particularly once most of his clothes have been cut away. I also have a difficult time imagining that Banderas' character would wear sparkly pasties on his nipples, or strut onstage with only sparkly streamers covering his genitals. It would seem rather contradictory to his masculine persona, whereas with Jett Adore, it makes perfect sense. These things, combined with all the mixing of "effeminate" movements described by David Gere, play with subverting the stereotype of

the masculine, “Latin lover” persona, making Jett Adore’s portrayal a more complex, layered performance.

I do not know that I would argue that Jett Adore’s act is a complete re-writing of the stereotypes that Desmond and Shay described in their writings, regarding American fascination with Latin dances. Without getting inside Jett Adore’s mind to tease out his thoughts and intentions regarding this performance, I am not sure a solid case can be made in favor of it being blatantly subversive. Perhaps my main concern is with the mind of the typical viewer or audience member, who might see this act and think of it as being “sexy” and “hot” because Jett Adore is portraying the character of Zorro, a pop culture figure often best known for his exotic sex appeal, particularly once he was portrayed by Antonio Banderas alongside Catherine Zeta-Jones. This could then potentially further propagate the myth of Latin Americans being sexy and sexual by nature, which is obviously problematic.

However, that all being said, I am also not comfortable labeling this act as simply as I perhaps did Dita Von Teese’s act. As I have stated, I feel there is more complexity at work in this particular act than I saw in Dita’s performance. The “Opium Den” not only conjured extremely harmful images of Chinese women, with its overly sexualized and glamorized portrayal of Orientalist stereotypes, but it did not in any discernible way, stray from white, heteronormative performance methods. Jett Adore at least problematizes the character he portrays through his use of gendered behaviors. His changing of gender codes provides some space for changing of other codes, challenging

our expectations of who this “Zorro” is. Instead of a hyper-masculine, hyper-sexualized, heteronormative male, there is nuance and complexity. As stated previously, I am not sure it is enough to completely overturn or subvert the stereotypes associated with “Latinness,” but there is at least another layer to the conversation.

CHAPTER V

STRIPPING AWAY THE STEREOTYPE: CALAMITY CHANG'S "HELLO KITTY"

Calamity Chang, a Chinese-American burlesque performer and producer, is based in New York City. She produces two weekly shows, two monthly shows, and co-produces the New York City "Asian Burlesque Spectacular," in addition to performing nationally and teaching classes at the New York School of Burlesque. "Inspired by her Chinese heritage," her acts range from "1920s Old Shanghai style," to neo-burlesque fetish acts "in which she subverts traditional fetishized roles,"⁶¹ which she is arguably most well known for. Her "Hello Kitty" act is described on her website as a "hilarious and brilliant interpretation of the "Asian Hooker" racist stereotype. The act is performed to LA's Steel Panther's titular song. 'In the age of extreme consumerism, Hello Kitty has lost her innocence by becoming a luxury franchise brand hawking thousand dollar diamond necklaces and other outrageous products that have nothing to do with the common, relatable figure. Consumerism has essentially 'whored' out Hello Kitty...'"⁶²

An integral part of this act is Calamity Chang's music choice of Steel Panther's "Asian Hooker" song. Steel Panther is a Los Angeles heavy metal band who parody mostly 1980s style heavy or "hair metal" music. They wear every stereotypical 1980s style rock clothing item you could possibly think of: ripped shirts, cheesy animal prints,

⁶¹ Calamity Chang, <http://www.calamitychang.com/#!about/cvh9> (Accessed February 9, 2015).

⁶² Calamity Chang, "Acts" <http://www.calamitychang.com/#!neo/cd4j> (Accessed February 9, 2015).

glittery belts, chain accessories, tons of tattoos (unknown if they are real or fake), headbands that attempt to hold back their super long hair, you name it. “With tongues firmly lodged in their cheeks, Steel Panther celebrate and ridicule all that was good and bad about the “great 80’s Hard Rock bands whose flamboyant stage shows and tales of excess with booze, sex, and narcotics are the stuff of legend...”⁶³ With song titles such as “The Burden of Being Wonderful,” “Stripper Girl,” “Party Like Tomorrow is the End of the World,” and “Asian Hooker,” Steel Panther lampoons the stereotypes surrounding not only heavy metal music, but subjects used by many different forms of music. To quote Calamity Chang, “When you listen to the entire song and take into consideration their entire body of work, how they present themselves on stage and in their social media interactions, even their music is a tacky tribute to hair metal, it’s quite clear that they are being funny. However irony isn’t always the magic answer and it’s very difficult to pull off.”⁶⁴ I think the last point Calamity Chang points out here is important not only in discussing Steel Panther’s song, but many neo-burlesque acts as well, particularly ones addressing racial stereotypes. Irony can be a brilliant way to make a particular statement, but it has to be done with great care and thought and may not in itself be enough.

Calamity Chang’s “Hello Kitty” act begins with her emerging on stage dressed up as Hello Kitty herself, as the opening strains of Steel Panther’s “Asian Hooker” begin to blare over the sound system. Right away, I find it interesting that she has chosen to create a costume that actually looks like a giant, oversized Hello Kitty, rather than what I would

⁶³ Steel Panther, “Music.” <http://steelpantherrocks.com/music/> (Accessed February 9, 2015).

⁶⁴ Shoshana, “Calamity Chang,” *Pin Curl Magazine* April 8, 2014 <http://pincurlmag.com/calamity-chang> (Accessed February 13, 2015).

term a “sexy Hello Kitty.” Very often in neo-burlesque, costumes of particular pop culture icons or figures like Hello Kitty, My Little Pony, Mario Kart, characters from the Harry Potter or Star Wars franchises, and any other number of popular culture phenomena are presented in “sexed-up” ways. Skirts are shorter, cleavage is amplified, midriffs are displayed, and so on and so forth. It’s a similar phenomenon seen every Halloween when options for adult women’s costumes range from “sexy convict” to “sexy ladybug.” (Who knew tiny red beetles could be thought of as sexy?!) But instead of going this direction, Calamity Chang makes a specific choice to design a costume that covers every inch of skin, including her face, which hides underneath a giant Hello Kitty head. This choice to not portray the “sexy Hello Kitty” character is already an effort on her part to not fall into the trap of continuing the very stereotype she is trying to disrupt.

Most noticeable right away, of course, is the giant Hello Kitty head, which looks heavy and cumbersome. I would also hazard a guess that it is not easy to breathe or see. Huge black eyes stand out against the white face and ears, with three black whiskers painted on each side of the face. A big pink, sparkly bow is perched just below the left cat ear. Noticeably missing is a nose and mouth, details that make the face all the more creepy. The big black eyes seem to jump out at you even more. While I, like many girls, played with and collected Hello Kitty memorabilia and knick-knacks, as I got older I must confess that I found Hello Kitty to be more eerie than cute. The fact that the Hello Kitty face has no mouth, just eyes and a tiny nose, makes the cultural icon downright creepy to me. Not to mention, I find it questionable that an icon that is so heavily marketed to young girls is lacking a mouth and therefore, would lack an ability to speak.

Perhaps it is a small detail, but I would argue that the omission of that detail conveys a strong message regarding the importance of a young girl's voice.

Calamity Chang's entire costume is composed of the white and pale pink colors seen on Hello Kitty dolls. A dress with long, puffy, white sleeves reaches just below her knees. The top is white, with a big pink sparkly heart nestled just below the chin. Her hands are covered with wrist length white gloves. A full pink skirt is gathered at the waist with a white and pink bow, and the hem flounces in a ruffle around her knees. Covering her legs are tights with alternating horizontal stripes of pale pink and a dusty rose pink. On her feet are what can perhaps only be described as oversize pink fluffy slippers. Not exactly anything that might ever be described as "sexy," unless you happen to have a very particular fetish.

When the music starts, Calamity Chang emerges on stage, waving to the audience. She pantomimes looking out at the audience, one hand shielding her eyes from the lights, as if she is looking for someone or something in particular. On cue, Steel Panther's vocalist sings "I'm in Tokyo, I'm looking for a whore" as she points to the audience, as if to call out someone in the audience for being that "whore." As he continues on to sing "I tried to score some blow," she pantomimes scooping something up to bring to her face, only to realize that she has no nose. She taps the spot where her nose would be with her palm, as if confused as to why she can't snort her imaginary cocaine, then seems to realize, "Oh! That's why this isn't working!" as she points to her face with her other hand, shrugging both shoulders as if to say, "Oh well."

As Steel Panther sings “Found a geisha girl,” Calamity outlines two curvy lines in the air with her hands, a motion used to signify the curves of a woman. With the next lyric “Took her for a whirl,” she slaps and grabs each hip, swiveling her hips in circles, followed by emphatic pelvic thrusts. She leans forward to grab the hem of her skirt, shaking her skirt as she slowly draws it up her legs. Normally in burlesque, this action of drawing up a skirt and revealing legs is done in a teasing, titillating manner, but not so here. No skin is being revealed, as her legs are covered by the striped pink stockings. There is no flirtatious or teasing manner implied through her movement, and because her face is covered by the Hello Kitty head, one cannot guess or infer what her facial expressions might be. As her skirt comes higher, the audience can see that she is wearing a baggy pair of pale pink “bloomers” or knee-length shorts. As she continues to gyrate and undulate her hips, she pulls the hem of the skirt all the way up to her chest to reveal silver sparkly letters across the front of the bloomers: “SASHIMI.” On cue, Steel Panther wails, “Smells like sushi...”

Calamity continues to wave the hem of her skirt at the audience as the words “Asian hooker/Hot little motherfucker” blare over the speakers. She turns her back to the audience, dropping the skirt hem, and leans over while running her hand over her hip and backside. Again, this is a gesture often seen in burlesque: the stroking of a body part, particularly legs, hips, waist, butt, or breasts as a way of teasing the audience. But here, on this Hello Kitty-costumed body, it has a completely different effect. Because the clothes are not conventionally sexy and there is no reveal, the effect is more ironic and even odd than anything else.

This pattern continues in the next musical verse. She holds up her hand, fingers splayed wide, and pulls off the short, wrist-length glove, one finger at a time, twirls it above her head like a lasso, and throws it to the side as if in disgust or frustration. This makes sense, given that the song lyrics are now bemoaning the singer's trip to South Korea, where he "broke out in gonorrhea." Then, as she moves on to her next glove, she brings her hand to her mouth, as if to mimic the traditional burlesque routine of removing gloves with your teeth. Though burlesque is not, I would argue, a codified dance form it does employ "codified dance movements that recur as part of the act of undressing and these are often located within a slow, deliberate tease; gloves eased off a finger at a time, sometimes through small biting movements that conjure up notions of oral fixation or fellatio..."⁶⁵ This move is seen almost every time a burlesque performer is wearing gloves: They have to come off first, generally speaking, because if you are wearing gloves, it hinders your ability to unbutton/unhook/unzip/undo almost anything else you are wearing. Only here, Calamity Chang attempts this tried-and-true method, but is stopped by the fact that her Hello Kitty head has no mouth. She pokes at the area where her mouth should be, as if to drive home the fact that she is missing a rather crucial part of her face to the audience, then gives it up and uses her other hand to remove the glove, tossing it aside in a similarly exasperated manner. Then, as if she has just realized that some of her skin is visible for the first time, she slowly draws her sleeves up to her elbow, one at a time.

⁶⁵ Sherrill Dodds, *Dancing on the Canon: Embodiments of Value in Popular Dance* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 122.

Next to go are the oversized pink slippers on her feet. Without build-up or ceremony, she leans over, pulls one off, tosses it aside, and repeats with the second. Underneath, she is wearing strappy black heels, no more than 3 inches high. As the band refrains the “Asian hooker” chorus, she makes several gestures that could be described as cat-like: she “paws” and scratches at the air in front of her, caresses the row of cat whiskers on the side of the Hello Kitty head, and curls her hands around the ears perched at the top of her head, much in the same way a cat would when grooming. It’s a rather odd sight to see such gestures in this setting, with the heavy metal music and bizarre/creepy Hello Kitty costume. Normally, any gestures with “feline” characteristics are seen in moves such as seductive crawling across the stage, or perhaps a lick of a hand or finger to again conjure an image of fellatio. (There seems to be a fascination in neo-burlesque with creating images associated with oral sex.) But Calamity Chang eschews this choice, instead using these gestures to create pictures that are more peculiar or intriguing than sexy.

A change in the music, culminating in a more noticeable, stronger downbeat, creates a change in the mood and actions of the act. Calamity Chang turns her back to the audience, hands placed firmly on hips. She unties the pink bow at the back of her waist, shaking her hips side to side in time with the music, then grabs the zipper at the top of her dress, pulling it down in small, quick jerks all the way to her waist. Keeping her back to the audience, she yanks one arm out of its sleeve, then another. Back still to the audience, and with the music beginning to crescendo, she swiftly slides the dress down her legs and all the way to the floor, lingering in a bent-over position so that the audience can clearly

see the word “WASABI” splashed across her posterior in the same shiny silver lettering with we saw spell out “SASHIMI” across her crotch earlier.

Removing her dress has revealed she is wearing a short black latex bustier that ends midway down her ribcage. This is the first remotely “sexy” piece of clothing we have seen so far in this act, and it comes as a surprise to me. I suppose I had expected pink or white undergarments, to continue the theme she had been setting forth so far with the rest of her costume, with the exception of her strappy black shoes. She briefly caresses the outline of her breasts, leading the audience to think that this is the next clothing item to go. But then she reaches down to her hips, grabs the sides of the pink bloomers, and tears them away, revealing a black studded thong underneath, with a pink sparkly pair of lips attached to the crotch. It’s a rather out of the ordinary sight to see: a woman dressed in a latex bustier, black studded thong, pink striped stockings, and a giant Hello Kitty head.

Next, she reaches up to the bustier zipper, unzipping it, but holding the clasp in a way that her breasts are still concealed. She teases the audience by pulling back and forth on the bustier clasp, playfully jiggling her breasts as if to say, “I know you’re waiting for me to take this off, but you’re going to have to wait until I decide I’m ready...” And she does make them wait a good 20 seconds or so. This may not sound like much, but in “burlesque stage time,” this can seem like much longer. Keeping in mind that the average burlesque act is less than five minutes long, we are three minutes into Calamity’s four minute act and it has been building, along with the music, to the final climactic moments

and the audience can feel that it is coming. A good burlesque performer, like Calamity Chang, will have the audience worked into an enthusiastic frenzy at this point and while the sounds of the audience has been edited out in this video, you can imagine the effect quite vividly, particularly given that the Steel Panther's guitar player is in the middle of a frenzied solo that also serves to heighten the excitement.

As the guitar solo ends and Steel Panther begins to belt out the chorus lines again, Calamity finally pops open the bustier to expose silver nipple tassels with tiny Hello Kitty faces covering her nipples. The bustier is thrown aside. And to complete the full reveal, she pulls the Hello Kitty head off, smiling and shaking out her long black hair. As a final touch, she peels the sparkly pink lips from her thong and sticks them onto the Hello Kitty face.

Stripping the Hello Kitty

In an interview with PinCurl Magazine, Calamity Chang states that she, by producing the annual "Asian Burlesque Spectacular" show, she hopes to:

present Asian female sexuality vis a vis our own agency rather than through pop culture's idea of what we are (geishas, hookers, masseuses, dragon ladies). It bothers me deeply that Asian women are always portrayed as not having control of our sexuality in a way that reminds me of how black men are portrayed as oversexed in popular culture. We want to challenge that perception and show Asian burlesque performers who are in control of how their sexuality is presented, whether it's funny, sexy, nerdy, freaky, whatever-on our own terms and choosing.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Shoshana, "Calamity Chang," *Pin Curl Magazine* April 8, 2014 <http://pincurlmag.com/calamity-chang> (Accessed February 13, 2015).

The portrayals of Asian women far too often are “depicted in film as spoils of war and objects of pleasure.” Far too often, “Asian women find their bodies are more often fetishized as objects of sexual conquest and seduction, as casualties of war, as mail-order items.” For instance, the 1991 musical, “Miss Saigon,” with its “Orientalist touches, exotic costumes, and peculiar actions...renews the stereotype of the destitute, helpless, and ultimately disposable Asian woman who is foolish enough to pin her hope on a white lover,”⁶⁷ a similar plotline to that of Puccini’s opera, *Madame Butterfly*. And as previously discussed in regards to Dita Von Teese’s “Opium Den” act, images of Asian women are far too often that of a naïve “happy go lucky” and “eager to please” girl (and I specifically use the word “girl” here, rather than woman) who is readily and happily available for white male consumption. Additionally, in what Jun Xing describes as “yellow fever narratives” in his “Cinematic Asian Representation in Hollywood” article,⁶⁸ the female characters are painted as exotic and desirous objects in a “place of tropical beaches, magical cultures, exotic landscapes, and sexual encounters.”⁶⁸ These landscapes showcase a world where “Asian women are objects of desire who provide sex, color and texture in what is essentially a white man’s world.”⁶⁹ They are “utterly feminine, delicate,

⁶⁷ Jun Xing, “Cinematic Asian Representation in Hollywood,” in *Performing Difference: Representations of “The Other” in Film and Theater*, ed. Jonathan C. Friedman (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2009), 119.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 118

⁶⁹ Jessica Hagedorn, “Asian Women in Film: No Joy, No Luck,” *Ms.* Jan./Feb., (1994), 78.

and quiet, a rare antithesis of their often allegedly loud independent American counterparts.”⁷⁰

I think it is safe to say that Calamity Chang’s performance would not be described as delicate, quiet, or demure. In contrast to Dita Von Teese’s “Opium Den,” Calamity Chang attempts to take the harmful stereotype of sexually available Asian women and deconstruct it, perhaps in an effort to claim her own agency and identity as a Chinese-American woman, taking control of the way her body is represented. There are a great deal of moments throughout this piece that subvert not only audience expectations, but the very notion of what burlesque “is” or should be. There seems to be a two-fold purpose to this act, though I cannot say if she consciously set out to do this in creating this act: By turning the “Asian hooker” stereotype on its head, she utilizes techniques that also play with the traditions of burlesque striptease. I would also argue that these techniques are imperative to her being able to turn the “Asian hooker” stereotype on its head.

In Sherrill Dodd’s chapter, “Naughty but Nice: Re-Articulations of Value in Neo-Burlesque Dance,” she argues that while

articulations of the erotic are expressed through diverse means, what binds these multiple representations is the use of facial expression as a critical performance commentary...I suggest that neo-burlesque performers consciously sabotage in the passivity of the feminine smile through a ‘choreography of facial commentary’: they wink suggestively, flick their eyes to heaven, pull coy faces, fabricate mock shock, and offer smiles of pleasure and collusion as a self-

⁷⁰ Jun Xing, “Cinematic Asian Representation in Hollywood,” in *Performing Difference: Representations of “The Other” in Film and Theater*, ed. Jonathan C. Friedman (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2009), 119.

reflexive performance strategy. In a conscious rejection of the fixed smile of feminine passivity, artists in the neo-burlesque scene employ facial expression to direct audience gaze, to foreshadow what is to come, to comment upon what has happened and to relay complex positions (such as commitment, detachment, and enjoyment) concerning their performative relationship to the act of undressing before a public audience.⁷¹

I do not disagree with Dodd on this point, but I think it is interesting to ask the question: What happens when the performer's face is completely concealed, like Calamity Chang? Does it prevent the performer from carrying out this sabotage of "feminine passivity?" Without the "choreography of facial commentary," how can the performer still reject the notion of the passive feminine subject?

I would argue that Calamity Chang does this, and more, in her Hello Kitty act. Furthermore, it is imperative that she is able to reject the notion of feminine passivity, given that the subject she is pointedly seeking to deconstruct concerns the sexual objectification of Asian women. The hiding of her face behind the Hello Kitty mask could be seen as a commentary by itself: that her Asian face cannot be seen because not only is it overshadowed by this commodified object that is Hello Kitty, but she as an Asian (specifically Chinese-American woman) may not be seen for who she is, but a conflagration of stereotypes regarding Asian women. The lack of mouth on Hello Kitty's face for the majority of the act could speak to how Asian women are stereotyped as quiet and submissive. Ending her act with the removal of the Hello Kitty head, Calamity Chang displays her own Asian face, smiling and swirling her long black hair, and subsequently

⁷¹ Sherrill Dodds, *Dancing on the Canon: Embodiments of Value in Popular Dance* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 123-124.

sticks the lips back onto where the mouth should be on the mask, perhaps symbolically taking back her voice.

Throughout this act, there are numerous instances of Calamity Chang choosing to create images that do not follow the typical idea of a sexy, teasing burlesque performance. She even pokes fun at some traditions, like her unsuccessful attempt to remove her white glove with her non-existent mouth. Or her odd cat-like gestures that seem to be more reminiscent of one of those uncoordinated cat-falling-off-various-surfaces videos you see all over Youtube, rather than a sultry feline figure. Or when she runs a hand over her hips and backside: Her clothes are not particularly form-fitting, so you cannot see the outline of her body, so running a hand over that body part gives little indication as to her form. And as there is no reveal, or hint of reveal to come, I would argue that it does not function as the teasing gesture it is normally seen as in most burlesque acts. Instead, it calls further attention to Calamity Chang's refusal to follow burlesque norms.

Additionally, there is a great deal of irony in hearing the words "Asian Hooker" blared over the sound system while she wears a costume that covers every bit of skin and is not conventionally sexy. Only when she has removed the top layer of the costume does the audience see anything resembling an outfit that might equate to a stereotype of an "Asian hooker." However, I think she makes an interesting choice in wearing pieces that resemble latex bondage gear, with the latex bustier and metal studded thong, rather than lingerie. Yes, it is sexual in nature, but this particular look goes against the stereotype of

the Asian woman as sexually demure, happy go lucky, or eager to please. And while she is dressing up as an Asian icon, it is not an icon generally associated with sexuality, such as a geisha or mail-order bride. To again quote Calamity Chang:

Part of my taking on Steel Panther's "Asian Hooker" is to put an actual Asian icon (Hello Kitty) to the song, then as the final reveal and actual Asian face (me) to the song. I think it helps to subvert the speaker's identity (in this case, the male voice) when an actual Asian person is embodying the song. I have seen on YouTube other non-Asian performers perform to that song in a Geisha outfit and that made me feel very uncomfortable.⁷²

I think she hits the nail on the head when she refers to the actions of white performers dressing up as geishas and dancing to that song. There are countless different connotations that would entail. I cannot think of a possible way in which a white performer dressing up as a geisha and performing to the song "Asian Hooker" could possibly be subversive of anything. That could only be interpreted as the white performer engaging in a performance of the exotic Other.

I would argue that Calamity Chang's "Hello Kitty" act is successful at subverting the stereotypes she takes on, often in very apparent ways. At no point does she strike me as passive, demure, or any number of stereotypes I have discussed. She is extremely in-your-face throughout the performance. Her subversion of burlesque stereotypes further strengthens her act by refusing to fall into the trap of passivity. By subverting the very traditions that have often made her the subject of objectification, via white burlesque

⁷² Shoshana, "Calamity Chang," *Pin Curl Magazine* April 8, 2014 <http://pincurlmag.com/calamity-chang> (Accessed February 13, 2015).

dancers performing the exotic Other, she is able to take agency over her performance and strip away the “Asian hooker” stereotype.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Queerlesque

While taking a Feminist Theory course with Dr. Danielle Bouchard in the UNCG Women/Gender Studies department, I struck up a conversation with a fellow student, Whitney Akers, who had done some burlesque performance in Lake Charles, Louisiana. We initially hatched the idea of holding a queer burlesque performance (or “Queerlesque”) early in the semester as a “Wouldn’t it be great to do a queer burlesque show here in Greensboro?!” moment. We had no idea how to go about making it happen, but the question had been planted and the more I thought about it, the more excited I got.

Greensboro does not have a big burlesque scene, so the idea of contributing to it in whatever small way was appealing. Additionally, several students who had attended one or more of my burlesque workshops in the dance department had inquired if I knew of performance possibilities in the community. It would be great to create something they could participate in, if they were willing to commit some time and patience to creating a good show! Also, in a purely selfish motivation, doing this show would push my own artistic boundaries immensely and perhaps provide some fodder for my thesis research. While I wouldn’t necessarily describe most of my acts as “classic,” they certainly hadn’t been particularly edgy. This was a chance for me to get outside my own comfort zone in a very big way, which was both nerve-wracking and exciting. I had spent a lot of time in

graduate school researching and writing about some of the ways neo-burlesque pushed at society's norms and values. Here was an opportunity to put that research into practice with my own body.

With the suggestions and help of my teacher, Cynthia Ling Lee, I got in touch with the Women/Gender Studies department to see if they might be interested in supporting this project. I had no idea what their response might be. What I certainly did not expect was the immediate, enthusiastic support for the idea. The department was organizing events for the annual university-wide "Love Your Body Week" at the end of October. A queerlesque show seemed a perfect fit for such a theme, particularly given that the WGS department expressed a specific interest in presenting ideas that dealt with queering what the term "love your body" can actually mean and how it gets practiced. Within a few days, I had a list of performers and two dance graduate students who volunteered to emcee the event. I was so busy organizing the show that I had no time to get nervous in the days leading up to it. With the exception of Whitney and myself, none of the performers had ever performed in a burlesque show before. I met with each performer a couple weeks before the show to talk through their ideas and provide any feedback they might want, but other than that, they were on their own when it came to creating their own acts. In the meantime, I began creating a new act of my own that I hoped would be a departure from my previous material and a foray into unfamiliar territory.

I wanted to explore more masculine imagery, since I usually dressed in a skirt and corset for burlesque shows. For music, I chose Beck's cover of David Bowie's song, "Diamond Dogs." I liked the sound, as well as the ambiguity behind the lyric's meanings. I experimented with masculine postures and gestures, largely inspired by watching videos of boylesque performers Ray Gunn, Jett Adore, Bazuka Joe, and Waxie Moon. For instance, I used standing postures with my feet planted out wide, instead of underneath me. I started out dressed in wide-legged light gray slacks, a fitted dark gray blazer, a black and gray vest, and a black and white fedora. I also borrowed a navy blue tie from my boyfriend's closet.

The first thing to go was the jacket, followed by the shoes. Next the slacks, revealing lacy black thigh high stockings and black "boy short" underwear. The vest followed suit and got tossed into an audience member's lap, leaving me standing clad in a black bra, fedora hat, navy tie loosely knotted around my neck, and aforementioned underwear and stockings. Those stockings got peeled off in what I rather consider one of my signature moves: peeling off the top end of one stocking until it comes off, then grabbing that end with my teeth and using the leverage to pull off the rest of the stocking.

Once all of these items had been removed, the audience could see the last part of my "costume": large pieces of masking tape strategically placed over various parts of my body, with big labels spelled out in black marker. Over the top of my breasts was "TOO BIG," in reference to a ballet teacher who said my size 32C breasts were too big for ballet, as well as the nickname given to me by a fraternity when I was in college:

Ballerina Barbie, which apparently was supposed meant as a compliment to my small waist size and (apparently) unexpectedly “large” bust size. Across my lower abdominal was written “SUCK IT IN,” a nod to one of my modern teachers who liked to yell that at the entire class as we danced, in an apparent effort to remind us to engage our lower abdominal muscles. The front of my right thigh said “MAN-THIGHS” and the back of my left thigh had one word: “CELLULITE.” Both of these labels spoke directly to my own bodily insecurities. I have always had very athletic, muscular legs and can recall having a love-hate relationship with them for a long time. This was my effort to continue dealing with my insecurities. And what better time to tackle that than a queerlesque performance during “Love Your Body Week?” I started peeling off the tape bit by bit at first, then as the musical tempo picked up and the audience cheered louder, I yanked it off by the handful, tossing the hurtful labels aside.

While perhaps a symbolic gesture, tearing these labels off my physical body gave me some sense of reclaiming ownership of my body. Did I tear down patriarchal institutions by doing so, or re-write the hegemonic power structures that inscribe my body with specific meanings and labels? Perhaps not. But I did get closer to embracing certain aspects of myself that I have struggled with for a long time, like my muscular, wide-shouldered frame that often gets called “masculine.” By using “men’s” clothing, I embraced that part of me, rather than feel I should shy away and try to be more “feminine,” whatever that even means.

My second foray into Queerlesque, I took a slightly different tack. Since we had been part of “Love Your Body” week, I had wanted to work that theme into my act. But this time there was not really a particular theme we were working with, so this time I decided to really delve into what it might mean to “queer” burlesque. Whitney and I performed a duet to Dinah Washington’s “Long John Blues,” using the hilariously raunchy lyrics to create a piece where we switched gender roles. She started out dressed in a skirt and boa as the “feminine,” where I dressed in shorts, a vest, and fedora as the “man.” In addition to looking the parts (sort of), we used our movements and interactions to portray the standard power roles: me as the more dominant, her as the submissive, flirtatious character. About halfway through, we traded a clothing item: my vest for her skirt, which resulted in us each wearing an odd combination of traditional women and men’s clothing. We then played around with switching roles back and forth, back and forth, until it got to the point where we were doing the same movements toward the end and the delineation between who held the “dominant” role was purposely unclear.

For my own solo, I settled on Leonard Cohen’s “I’m Your Man,” as I wanted to continue my exploration into the gender-bending possibilities of burlesque. But I also found myself wanting to fuck with the idea of what burlesque “is” and subvert the expectations of the audience. I purposely placed myself later in the line-up of the show, so that there would be some build-up for the audience as to what to expect when a burlesque performer gets onstage, which I could then (hopefully) mess with.

I did not want to do a “traditional” striptease. The standard burlesque act tends to go in a sequence: gloves, top or dress, shoes, stockings, and bra. Obviously there is some variation depending on costume, but the end result is generally a nude, or mostly nude performer. Some burlesque performers have developed “reverse strip tease” acts, where they start out nude and put on clothes as their act, which can be very interesting. I considered doing a reverse striptease, but just doing the exact opposite of a “normal” striptease didn’t quite feel like the direction I wanted to go. I also still wanted to incorporate some kind of “gender-bending,” but again, avoid the route of “change from one gender to another” route.

Before my act, I had the stage kitten place my gray vest, black bra, and gray slacks in various places around the stage. (In burlesque language, a stage kitten is like a stage hand, except they get to dress up and are not hidden backstage the whole show. They traditionally are in charge of picking up the discarded clothes and props after each act and returning them to their rightful owner, as well as setting up any props the next performer needs.) I began dressed in a long gray pencil skirt, elbow length black satin gloves, black thigh high stockings, and black satin high heeled shoes. Most noticeable (I would guess) was what I was not wearing: any top or bra. Also, instead of wearing my usual sequined, glittery pasties, I just used black tape to cover my nipples. I would have felt comfortable not even using the tape, but technically my baring all would violate North Carolina law and I did not feel this show was in the appropriate setting or time to have that particular discussion. I also didn’t feel it would be fair to the other performers involved to potentially get all of us into trouble by pursuing essentially my own agenda.

Once onstage, I used my fedora hat to cover my chest until the first time Leonard Cohen sings the line, “I’m your man,” at which point I quickly placed the hat on my head, playing on the irony of the song’s lyrics and my now-fully revealed bare chest. To re-emphasize that point, I next removed the glove from my right hand, one finger at a time, sliding it across my chest as I pulled my hand out of the glove. My next move was to slide out of my skirt, hoping to build the audience’s expectations that I would continue revealing more and more, as burlesque acts normally do. I then interrupted this pattern by picking up my bra from the floor and putting it on, to the slight confusion (it seemed) of the audience. As a kind of quick reassurance, I then took off one of my high heeled shoes and a thigh high stocking. At this point, I must have looked rather strange, given that I was wearing a bra, hat, underwear, one glove, one stocking, and one shoe. The logical next step would have been for me to remove the remaining shoe and stocking...so instead, I put on my vest, buttoning only one of the three buttons, and putting it through the wrong buttonhole, so the vest was slightly skewed. Last up, I slid my legs into the slacks, finishing the act in an odd state of half-dress. And I have to say, I was particularly proud of the fact that I managed to dance through the majority of this act wearing one shoe without tripping and falling on my face.

Concluding Thoughts

My reason for book-ending this project with autobiographical accounts of my experience in the neo-burlesque community serves multiple purposes: I wish to be very up-front with the reader regarding my positionality within this research, and any biases

that may come with that position. Additionally, by including my own musings and memories of my artistic journey, complete with my grappling of theoretical and artistic questions regarding the creation of my own burlesque acts, I hope to provide another kind of perspective to this body of work to supplement the more theoretical aspects. And finally, as I have recounted my own experimentation and growth as an artist and burlesque scholar, including a different style of writing in this project seemed important. As I have performed and choreographed different “styles” of burlesque, here in this project, I present both academic and autobiographical writing styles.

As I have noted, there is a great deal of ethos in the neo-burlesque community regarding the finding of “empowerment” through burlesque; of loving one’s body and inclusion of bodies that do not fit with society’s norms. But through this ethos lies the potential pitfall of finding empowerment by performing or playing at an exotic persona. This only serves to reinforce the white, heteronormative power structures that the “inclusive” ethos often rails against, which I find to be wildly counterproductive. However, I do believe in the potential of neo-burlesque to be a powerful performance art form. There has been a huge influx of new performers in the last several years, thanks in large part to the establishment of burlesque schools in cities such as New Orleans, Seattle, Chicago, New York City, Dallas, and Portland, as well as what seems to be a reinvigorated interest in feminism, albeit fairly mainstream feminism. I remain excited to see what kind of projects these performers take on in the future. But part of that potential can only be unlocked if the neo-burlesque community continues to have these kind of conversations regarding race and the consequences of performing exotic Others on stage.

In closing, I wish to emphasize the fluid, complex qualities often present in neo-burlesque performance regarding issues of race and performing the exotic Other. I think it is tricky and often unproductive to attempt to nail down a simple answer, particularly in the examples I have presented in this text. Rather, I am more interested in the teasing apart of the various layers present in each performance in regards to this question of performing the exotic Other. There cannot always be a simple answer, especially when the questions being debated or discussed are enormous systemic issues such power structures, race, culture, gender, and sexuality.

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